

Duns Libraries

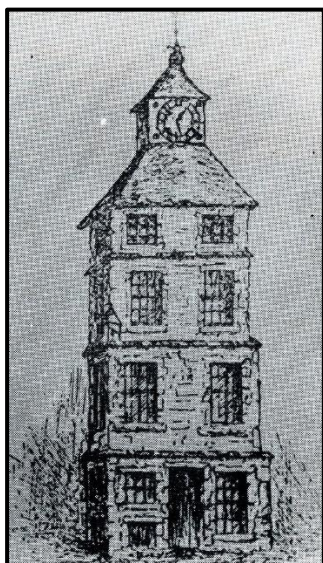
David McLean (2025)

Dunse Subscription Library to 1875

In the early nineteenth century, our modern concept of a community library – maintained from public funds and freely available to all – was virtually unknown. Instead, many towns at that time had ‘subscription libraries’ which typically required members to pay an initial membership fee and an annual subscription thereafter. Such a library was the one formed in Dunse in 1768 and located in a room in the Tolbooth on the west side of the Market Place. Members had to pay an initial fee of four guineas which made them share-holders of the library; if they ever went three years without paying their annual subscription, these shares were forfeited. The library room was probably open to members for no more than a couple of hours each week and would have contained mainly non-fiction books.

The Tolbooth was so badly damaged by a fire in 1795 that it had to be demolished but the library was replaced. For the next 25 years, it relied for its accommodation on the benevolence of Dunse citizens who had a spare room although a rent was probably paid; for example, it was at one time in the house of John Cameron, a currier (leather maker). The space was almost certainly small but then the library stock would have been small too.

When the new Town Hall opened in the Market Place in 1820, the subscription library was moved to a room towards the top of the tower. New members were probably still paying an entrance fee to join but the annual subscription had been reduced from 12 shillings to 10 shillings around 1800, perhaps because the library stock was smaller after the Tolbooth fire.



Library located in Tolbooth (left) 1768-1795 and Town Hall (right) 1820-1875

The subscription library continued to offer very limited hours. In 1870, it was open for one hour between 12 noon and 1pm on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The annual subscription was still 10 shillings and members now had access to around 5000 books as well as a supply of magazines. A catalogue of the stock was available to members but there was a separate charge of 1s 6d for that. The library was looked after by William Home Waite who, at the age of 31, was single and living at home in Easter Street with his parents and sister at the time of the 1871 census. He was listed as an accountant and collector of the parish rates – acting as librarian was a part-time job.

Without public funding, of course, the Dunse library depended totally on the subscriptions of its 70 or so members. There was rent and a librarian to pay and new books needed to be purchased on a regular basis if the library was to retain support. But it was a facility which, by and large, was accessible only to better off tradesmen and above. As time passed and the stock of books grew, the limited space in the Town Hall became problematic and it was also at the top end of a couple of flights of stairs. In 1871, the committee of the Corn Exchange was approached to see whether space for the library might be made available there but the exchange share-holders were not in favour. More imaginative ideas were required.

New Dunse Subscription Library, 1875

In the early 1870s, the bold decision was taken by the library subscribers to attempt to raise funds for the construction of a purpose-built library; they settled on a bazaar in 1873. Where it was held is unknown but it can only have been in the Town Hall or the Corn Exchange. Bazaars were a common means of raising money then and often achieved surprising sums from their stalls and amusements. Later, much was made of the efforts which had been put into the library bazaar by ‘the ladies’ who had gathered and created a remarkable display of craft items for sale. The new library cost around £670 and it seems that much of that sum had been realised by these ladies; the rest probably came from donations.

The result was the construction of an ‘elegant and commodious Library Hall’ on a site on the north side of Newtown Street, now occupied by the modern extension to the police station. The site had reasonable depth but only a limited street frontage and so the new library had to be built gable-wise to the road, detracting somewhat from its appearance. It was designed by Dunse architect and builder George Fortune who later lived at the top of Bridgend in a house called Kilmeny (now Fenton Lodge). The cost of building the library was aided hugely when Fortune produced all the plans and then acted as inspector of works completely free of charge; it was a fine gesture.

The new library was built in what was known as domestic Gothic style. Fortune did his best with the prominent street gable by giving it tripartite, lancet windows in the upper level. The building had two apartments on the ground floor. One was a residence for the library caretaker and the other was a room available for rent in order to defray ongoing running costs. The entire upper floor was a single room some 33 feet by 22 feet to accommodate the library with book shelves around the walls; there was also a rail all the way round so that the books could not be accessed without passing the librarian’s desk at the southern end. Walls and ceiling were lined in wood, giving the library hall a neat and pleasant appearance. The

only unusual aspect was that the library was accessed by an outside, open staircase, presumably at the rear of the building. This was not the best of features when affected by snow or ice but Fortune's motivation was probably to maximise the internal space for its primary function. The new library was opened in early 1875.



Dunse subscription library designed by George Fortune and opened in 1875

It would appear that the need to pay an initial entrance fee had gone but the annual subscription of 10 shillings remained except for members of the town's Young Men's Association who were granted a reduced rate. The room on the ground floor was rented straight away by the local Volunteers for their armoury store and the library hall itself was sometimes hired by town societies for meetings. There were now around 80 subscribers and the library was supervised by a librarian who doubled as secretary and treasurer, aided by a small committee. The intention was to spend around £30 each year on new books so as to keep adding to the 5000 volumes initially transferred from the Town Hall. But the library still had very limited access – 12 noon to 1pm on Tuesdays and 7pm to 8.15pm on Saturdays.

Controversy and Difficult Times, 1900-1920

In the early twentieth century, the development of libraries everywhere was dominated by the name of Andrew Carnegie, an emigrant Scot who became one of the richest Americans in history through his Carnegie Steel Company which he sold to J P Morgan in 1901 for over \$300 million. Carnegie then devoted the rest of his life (he died in 1919) to giving his fortune away to a variety of philanthropic causes, especially in the USA and Britain. Funding to help

communities establish free libraries was available from an early point as long as local authorities made matching contributions by providing budgets for ongoing upkeep.

As early as 1903, a resident using the name 'Dunsonian' wrote to the Berwickshire News on the matter of establishing a free library in the town under the Carnegie scheme. It was understood that a grant would depend on either the Subscription Library or the Workingmen's Institute (which also had a library room) making their premises available to the town. 'Dunsonian' was concerned that any efforts in this direction might be opposed by the members of both organisations out of self-interest. The fear proved well-founded. While neither expressed outright opposition to the idea when first approached by Duns Town Council, the response was lukewarm and guarded.

In the spring of 1904, the town council therefore organised a meeting in the Town Hall for councillors and the committees of the Subscription Library and the Workingmen's Institute in an effort to take the matter further. The sensitivity surrounding the issue was evidenced by the meeting being held in private. Virtually nothing was ever reported from this meeting except to say that, after discussion, the proposal to pursue a Carnegie grant did not meet with general approval; the town council dropped the idea for the time being. The Berwickshire News headed its inevitably limited report 'Collapse of the Free Library Scheme'.

Access to books continued to be restricted, therefore, to those able and willing to pay annually to be members of the Subscription Library in Newtown Street. In 1908, Hay of Duns Castle negotiated a deal whereby he subscribed a lump sum to the library's funds in return for any of his employees being allowed to use the facility. Then, the Great War began and the years which followed proved disastrous for the Subscription Library. By 1919, the number of subscribers had fallen to such a level that it was financially impossible to keep the library going. Steps were taken to dissolve the organisation and dispose of its assets. But the library's crisis became the town's opportunity.

The Carnegie Trust and Berwickshire Central Library, 1920

In 1913, Andrew Carnegie gave a further \$10 million to endow the Carnegie UK Trust, a grant-making foundation. Its trustees were given considerable latitude in how their funds were used and they inaugurated a policy of financing rural library schemes rather than concentrating on buildings which often benefitted those who lived in towns but were of limited use to anyone residing in the countryside.

By an act of 1918, parish school boards were abolished and educational provision was entrusted to county-wide education authorities which were permitted to spend funds on libraries. In early 1920, with the Newtown Street library 'now in process of dissolution', Berwickshire Education Authority made contact with the Carnegie UK Trust and a deputation went to Dunfermline (Carnegie's birthplace) to meet trust officials. It was a very successful meeting and the outcome was the offer of a grant of £2100 to set up a rural library scheme in Berwickshire, based in the subscription library building in Newtown Street.

The education authority used half of the grant to offer £1000 to the members of the Subscription Library for their building and all its stock and fittings, an offer which was

accepted. Money was then spent on more books since only 3500 books of the library's stock were considered suitable for the new purpose; the intention was to double that number. The lighting was improved in the library and the rail around the shelves was removed – an interesting gesture in itself. Considerable funds had to be spent on acquiring library boxes since the intention was to use Duns as a base from which books would be distributed to schools and other local libraries all over the county. These boxes were quite ingenious, fashioned as small book-cases with handles on the sides and doors which could be fastened with a metal bar to avoid spills in transit.

The Newtown Street building was now known as the county's Central Library and Miss Ethel Leitch Hammond was appointed as its first librarian. She had learned her trade at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow and then gone to Dunfermline to work for the Carnegie UK Trust. She had organised a rural library scheme for the north of Scotland which had become the model for all future schemes in the country. It would be hard to imagine a more suitable appointment for Berwickshire's new venture although Miss Hammond only stayed until 1924. The appointment of a lady librarian, however, 'came in for a good deal of adverse comment' from the Duns Comrades of the Great War who had expected efforts to be made to employ an ex-serviceman.

Berwickshire's Central Library was opened in November 1920 by Provost Carmichael of Coldstream who was chairman of the county's education authority. A letter had been received from the Carnegie Trust congratulating them on being one of the pioneering authorities for the Rural Libraries Scheme. Carmichael hoped 'that as the years go on, its usefulness will increase, bringing pleasure and benefit to the sons and daughters of Berwickshire'.

The people of Duns and Berwickshire in general now had a truly free library for the first time. All county rate-payers and persons over 14 endorsed by a rate-payer could acquire a ticket and borrow books from the library. However, it was only open on weekdays and for a maximum of four hours on any one day. Children under 14 could access the books sent out to schools in the book boxes. Eventually, the Central Library in Duns sent out boxes to around 70 locations, not just schools but village libraries, Scottish Women's Rural Institutes, branches of the Scottish Farm Servants Union – indeed, anywhere with a suitable space and volunteers willing to organise the scheme. The book boxes were changed every two months.

New Library Premises, 1946

The Central Library and rural scheme were a great success. There were over 11,000 books in stock by 1930 with over 40,000 borrowings each year; 74 schools and other centres were being supplied across the county. In 1931, the work of the librarian had become so demanding that the appointment of an assistant was necessary. There was some incredulity at the paltry £30 being offered as the starting annual salary but it was emphasised that the post was for a 'student assistant'; it was clearly the cheapest option as, probably, was the second-hand type-writer purchased at the same time for the librarian.

The reality was that, after little more than ten years, the Central Library was a victim of its own success and already becoming too small. In 1934, the Chief Public Assistance Officer

was ejected from the rented room downstairs (he was found accommodation elsewhere) so that the space could be taken over to shelve books but it was only a temporary respite. The upstairs location of the library and its open, outside stair also presented increasing difficulties, especially when it came to moving heavy boxes of books. A new building was clearly required but the costs of acquiring land seemed prohibitive.

Then came a remarkable act of benevolence. The Reverend Doctor John Cairns OBE was born at Longformacus in 1865. He was a United Presbyterian minister of congregations at Kilmarnock Glencairn, Woolwich in London and latterly at the Benwell Presbyterian Church in Newcastle. He saw a great deal of service as an Army Chaplain during the First World War and, in 1924, was awarded his Doctor of Divinity degree by Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. He retired from his Newcastle charge in 1927 to return to his native Berwickshire and he settled in Duns, at Glencairn (which he presumably re-named after his old Kilmarnock parish) on Bridgend. He was soon a member of Berwickshire County Council and was appointed to its education and public health committees – county councils took over from education authorities in 1929. He also accepted an offer to become a Duns town councillor and served as a Justice of the Peace. He was a hugely respected figure in the Duns community and beyond.



Rev Dr John Cairns OBE, Army Chaplain, and Glencairn on Bridgend where he lived

In 1936, Cairns purchased number 49 Newtown Street, a dilapidated property which had been declared unfit for human habitation; he then donated it to Berwickshire County Council as space for a new library. The building itself was useless but, once demolished, it would provide a site with a very reasonable street frontage and very substantial depth amounting to around a quarter of an acre. With no land to purchase, the council now had a project within its reach. In May 1936, Berwickshire County Council gave its official consent to the erection of a new County Library at a probable cost of £1400. The county council would purchase the

old subscription library building for office use for £800 and the Carnegie Trust would provide £160; the cost to the council's education committee would therefore be £440.

There was, however, an issue – although unfit for habitation, 49 Newtown Street still had four tenants! The property had previously belonged to local builder James Johnston Cowper and Duns Town Council's housing committee had served a notice on him in 1935 since the building had no internal water supply and only one WC for the four tenants. Cowper eventually replied to say that he would give notice to the tenants to quit by Whitsun (May) 1936 after which he would rebuild or dispose of the property. In the meantime, John Cairns bought the building from Cowper and served a similar notice on the tenants to quit. But they failed to move, probably because there was nowhere for them to go.

The town council's housing committee were reluctant to move the tenants into some of the new council houses then being built since 49 Newtown Street, while officially unfit for habitation, had not actually been condemned – and so the council would receive no government grant. In March 1937, this technicality was satisfied when a demolition order was served on the property. The tenants could now be moved.

Valuable time had already been lost but further lengthy unexplained delays then hampered the project. It was December 1938 before the county council's education committee invited contractors to even declare an interest in tendering for works in connection with the new County Library; and it was January 1939 before a warrant was sought to demolish the old property. In February, estimates were accepted for the various works so that construction could begin but the price had risen to over £2000. The old building was demolished and work on the new library commenced.

Then, the Second World War began. With materials prioritised for war purposes, a project such as that in Newtown Street was inevitably compromised. In March 1940, Doctor Cairns himself reported the education committee's regrets that, although the library was almost completed, a lack of materials was holding up the final stage. It may be added that the new school being built in Chirnside was similarly affected.

Although unfinished, the new library building was capable of being occupied and it spent most of the war years as headquarters for the local Air Raid Precaution team. It was agreed that this could happen in the summer of 1941 when the ARP asked to 'procure' the incomplete building. With some government funding, they did extra work especially to install toilets since the control room had to be manned day and night. And then, when the war was over, it seemed that some people had forgotten why the building was put up in the first place. Councillor Dorothy Burns asked, in July 1945, what was being done with the ARP centre now that it was closed; the county clerk informed her that it would be used for the public library.

In the autumn of 1945, architect George Duns was negotiating for completion of the library building and hoped it would be ready 'at an early date'. There was still the frustration of a shortage of materials but the work was finished over the next six months and the new County Library was opened to readers on 01 April 1946 with Miss Ellen Davidson as County Librarian. Sadly, John Cairns never got to see the completed library building on the site which he had so generously donated; he died at his Glencairn home of leukemia at the age of 80 in April 1945.

The next major change came in the late 1960s by which time the new County Library was itself proving to be too small, especially since it also served as the headquarters for all Berwickshire library services. A two-storey extension on land behind the library, costing £33,000, was opened in October 1969 by Bruce Millan, Under-Secretary of State for Scotland. On the ground floor there was a room dedicated to local history resources, a room holding materials which teachers could borrow for pupil projects, increased shelving for reference books and an improved 'browsing area' for readers. A large upstairs space held all the library service's reserve stock. And, at the rear of the new extension, there was a garage and workroom for the mobile library van, a facility which had been introduced in 1962 with Ralph Dodds as its first driver/librarian. A record lending library was added in the 1970s.



Berwickshire County Library at 49 Newtown Street, opened in 1946

The 'County Library' at 49 Newtown Street continues to function as a library and now also incorporates a public contact centre and computer suite. There is an exhibition space and a store-room housing artefacts belonging to the museum service. From time to time, the library's viability as a book repository in a computer age has been called into question and, at the time of writing this paper, its future has once more come under threat.

The information in this paper has been researched from various newspapers of the time (especially the Berwickshire News) and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

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