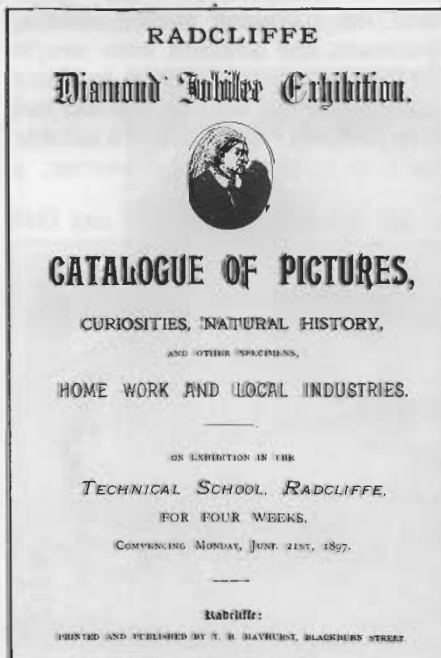


'TO INVESTIGATE, INSTRUCT AND INSPIRE': THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF BURY MUSEUM

Jim Garretts

On 20 June 1897, Britain celebrated the sixtieth year of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. A Diamond Jubilee Exhibition was held at Earls Court to mark the event, and was entitled 'The Victorian Age'. Celebrations were held all over the country, as the nation recaptured the patriotic mood of the 1887 Golden Jubilee. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had already given their patronage to exhibitions on several occasions; the Prince Consort was President of Her Majesty's Commissioners for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Exhibition of Art Treasures in Manchester (1857) and the International Exhibition in London (1862) had also received royal support, and therefore the idea of celebrating the Diamond Jubilee through the provision of a cultural experience was both socially and, at least at a local level, politically expedient. This attitude would appear to have prevailed in the locality of Bury, for in 1897 two particular events took place in the region which had an important bearing on the establishment of a museum for the town.

Exhibition Catalogue, 1897.



Bury Art Gallery and Museum

The first of these two events took place in Bury, seventeen years after the death in 1880 of a local industrialist named Thomas Wrigley. His father, James Wrigley, had established a papermaking concern in the town, and Thomas followed in his father's footsteps. As well as being an astute businessman, Thomas took an active interest in current affairs both local and national, and had a keen appreciation of art. During his lifetime he amassed a significant collection of over two hundred works, which included oils, watercolours, drawings, engravings, sculpture and Wedgwood ware. Among the artists represented were Turner, Constable, Landseer and Cox. In January 1897, the entire collection was offered to Bury Corporation by his three surviving children, in commemoration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The gift was, however, subject to a number of conditions, one being that the Corporation should provide a suitable building in which to keep it. Bury Corporation agreed; a foundation stone was laid in April 1899, and Bury Art Gallery was officially opened by the Earl of Derby on 9 October 1901. The new building also housed a public library, and now also houses Bury Museum, which was incorporated some six years later. Described by Pevsner as 'probably the best building in Bury', it is now a Listed Building with Grade II status.¹

The second occurrence of note took place just a few miles away from

Bury. In June 1897, a Diamond Jubilee Exhibition was held in Radcliffe, at the local Technical School. A catalogue was printed which describes the pictures, photographs, curiosities, natural history specimens, and artefacts of local industries that were lent by individuals and institutions for a four-week period. The exhibition occupied three floors of the building, and it is interesting to note that among the exhibits was a 'Frame containing Old Pamphlets showing the literary attainments of Thos. Wrigley Esq...'² Radcliffe District Council's Technical Instruction Committee combined with committees from the Amateur Photographic Club and the Radcliffe and District Literary and Scientific Society to organise the exhibition, and it was the latter institution which was to play an important part in developing the idea of a museum in the locality. For although the Radcliffe Diamond Jubilee Exhibition was a success, the objects had all been loaned (apart from a few presentations such as candles from Price & Co and cocoa samples from Messrs. Rowntree and Fry & Sons!). It occurred to the Radcliffe and District Literary and Scientific Society that the creation of a permanent repository of objects, that is to say, a museum, would be a worthwhile accomplishment. This idea was realised on 29 September 1898, when the Radcliffe Museum was formally opened. The *Bury Guardian* (24 September 1898), announced that:



Barwood House, Ramsbottom, where the Rev. McClean housed his collection.

...on Thursday next Colonel Mellor, M.P. has consented to open an interesting collection of curios, fossils, stuffed animals, shells etc., which have been collected and located in the Congregational Lecture Hall, Water Lane.

and that the collection

...is one of which the town has every reason to be proud, and one, which from its educational value alone, ought to be highly prized.

Sadly, however, Radcliffe Museum was not permanently established, and relied on the good offices of the Congregational Church in Water Lane to house the collections. The *Bury Guardian* (1 October 1898) reported the words of Colonel Mellor, who stated that he:

...would like to see a public library established in Radcliffe in a suitable building, and that a room might be provided in connection therewith in which that museum might be permanently settled as the property of the town.

Thus, by 1901, Bury had no museum of its own, and Radcliffe had no library in which to house its museum. It is fairly likely that the presence of a museum in a neighbouring district was instrumental in raising the possibility of a museum in Bury. What no-one could foresee then was that in 1907 not only would Bury get a museum and Radcliffe a library, but that they would both open on the same day!

A Museum Sub-Committee of the Art Gallery and Library Committee in Bury met on 28 May 1903 to propose that:

a Museum be established at a capital cost not exceeding £200 for furnishing, fitting, &c., and an annual revenue expenditure of not more than £80 for maintenance.

The Committee did not approve the idea, however, stating that in their

opinion, '...it is not a desirable time to establish a museum'.³ Nevertheless, the idea was re-presented some three years later, by a Museum Sub-Committee of the Art Gallery and Library Committee on 17 July 1906. Examination of the Committee Minutes would indicate that the Sub-Committee had, by this time, learned some lessons in the art of achieving objectives. On this occasion they enlisted the help of the Librarian/Curator, Harry Townend, who presented a highly detailed report together with plans for the proposed museum. Entitled, 'Scheme for the establishment of a Museum in the basement room of the Art Gallery', it addressed the relevant issues in a concise but thorough manner. The area to be adapted measured some sixty feet by twenty-seven feet, which would, it was proposed, form a suitable museum space after some basic decoration and installation of light fittings and display furniture. An estimate of the costs was provided. Capital costs came to £87. 10s. 0d., which covered the cost of showcases and 'Alterations to basement, beautifying and fitting'. Revenue costs were calculated at £30. 0s. 0d. per year, which allowed for cleaning, attendance, and, among other things, 'Purchase of objects... labels and shelf fittings... and subscription to the Association'.⁴ Mr Townend commented that as far as the provision of staff was concerned,

There need be little expense on account of staff, as the Librarian and Curator of the Art Gallery might be appointed Curator of the Museum also, including that work in his duties as the servant of the Committee. A rearrangement of the duties of attendants and caretakers would be sufficient to ensure the cleaning, patrolling and keeping in order of the room.

Furthermore he commented that:

Close House, Close Park, home for Radcliffe Museum between 1934 and 1949.



To avoid the acquirement of unsuitable objects it would be wise to appoint an expert having no local connection to advise the acceptance or refusal of gifts, or to guide the Committee as to purchases. The directions in which a Museum Committee is tempted to stray from the consistent path are so numerous that the best advice will be the cheapest in the end.⁵

Whatever the merits or otherwise of the Sub-Committee's submission, it was resolved to accept the proposal and establish a museum for Bury. The concept of the need for the careful selection of objects would seem to anticipate the modern Acquisition and Disposal Policy document by some eighty years. The independent expert appointed was Dr. Hoyle of the Manchester Museum, to act on the Committee's behalf. Maybe he was needed, for the Committee had already obtained:

some objects suitable for exhibition in the proposed Museum. There is the Argentine Cruiser, at present in the "C" Gallery; a piece of Chinese embroidery some yards long, two wall frames of Japanese silk painting; a frame of English embroidery; an ancient British quern; and some scarce and curious local books, portraits and documents.⁶

The overt need for prudence in the area of staffing, however, may not have been so beneficial. Nevertheless the local press considered the idea of a museum a worthy one, and the *Bury Times* (4 August 1906) remarked 'A good museum will undoubtedly increase the popularity of the building'.

Over the following twelve months, specimens and artefacts were sought for the new museum. Offers had been made to Bury in the past, but had had to be declined for the lack of a suitable place to display them. However, a

significant gift was accepted in the autumn of 1906. The *Bury Times* (27 October 1906) reporting that:

Dr. J.B. Kerr of Manchester-road, and his two brothers (Mr. W. B. Kerr and Dr. J. L. Kerr) have offered the geological collection amassed by their father to the town. The collection is a very fine one and in some respects unique. The donors suggest that it shall be known as "the James Kerr Geological Collection". The Committee have gladly accepted the offer of Dr. Kerr and his brothers.

By the autumn of 1907, the new museum was ready to open. Apart from the Kerr Collection, there were other major gifts from Alderman Duxbury and Jonathan Blunt. The *Bury Guardian* (24 August 1907) listed the material that would be on view and gave particular coverage to Mr. Blunt whose donation was 'perhaps the most extensive and cosmopolitan gift to the museum'. This included:

...old muskets, a flint-rock (sic) duck shot gun, pistols, spears and clubs from Africa and Polynesia, cutlasses, sabres, a dress rapier of the 18th Century, and snow shoes from Canada and Lapland... the collection of eggs and butterflies in the Blunt gift must eventually prove very great to the student of natural history... miniature casts of the friezes of the Parthenon and other great temples... snakes and lizards preserved in spirits of wine...

Alderman Duxbury presented a large collection of birds; other donations included specimens of wood and cotton, flints, stone weapons, and old shuttles. A large number of artefacts were lent by institutions and individuals; the Victoria and Albert

Museum, the Pilkington Company of Clifton, and James Shaw, a local artist, were included in the list of lenders.

The opening of Bury Museum was set for Saturday, 19 October 1907, and Cuthbert Cartwright Grundy was invited to perform the official ceremony. Cuthbert Grundy was born in Bury in 1846, and had been a great patron of the arts. In 1911 he would be instrumental in the establishment of the Grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool. Unfortunately, owing to ill-health, he was unable to officiate at Bury, and therefore Alderman Butcher, the Chairman of the Art Gallery and Library Committee carried out the formal proceedings instead. The importance of Alderman Butcher's position was stressed by the *Bury Times* (23 October 1907):

Alderman Butcher had been a member of the Council for nearly twenty-five years and had been chairman of important Committees like the Finance Committee and the Education Committee before becoming Chairman of the most important Committee over which he now presided.

As has been already mentioned, Radcliffe Library opened on the same day as Bury Museum, a chance event noted by the *Bury Times* (19 October 1907):

It is rather a singular coincidence that on the very day when the Radcliffe Free Library, with a Museum as a valuable adjunct, is to be thrown open for the use and enjoyment of the public, the Bury Art Gallery and Library Committee are also engaged in adding to the usefulness of the institution under their care by

inaugurating a Museum.

The opening of Bury Museum was covered with great enthusiasm by the local press. Both the *Bury Times* and *Bury Guardian* reported the official formalities in great detail, the latter hoping that the new venture would fulfil a museum's '...three principal functions — investigation, instruction, and inspiration...' (19 October 1907). 'The Committee and the Curator desired that the institution they were engaged in opening should not merely be a home for curios...'

The public response to the new amenity was enthusiastic. The *Bury Times* (26 October 1907) recorded that 'the visitors to the Bury Art Gallery and Museum during the past week numbered 2,408, as compared with 950 in the corresponding week of last year'.

However, in spite of the best intentions that the Museum may have had, it would appear that Alderman Butcher's concern for the maintenance of an educative and relevant collection for Bury was, at some point, forgotten. Some fifty years later, Philip Chadwick, the Borough Librarian and Curator, was to describe the collections as '...a terribly old-fashioned hotch-potch of practically everything in creation'. (*Bury Times* 26 March 1960).

The sweeping changes which should have followed Chadwick's comments were not immediately forthcoming. It may have been that the machinations of local government did not lend themselves to such radical measures; though paradoxically it was the local government reorganisation of 1974 that provided a boost to Bury Museum. The newly-created



Austin 8 Delivery Van purchased by Bury Museum in 1989.

Metropolitan Borough of Bury incorporated the six towns of Bury, Prestwich, Radcliffe, Ramsbottom, Tottington and Whitefield. As far as the Museum was concerned, developments occurred in two key areas, namely collections and staffing.

The museum's collections were themselves enhanced in two particular respects; on the one hand the extended geographical boundaries of the Metropolitan Borough widened the scope for acquisitions, and on the other hand Bury was able to take over the collections of Radcliffe Museum.

Since its inception in 1898, Radcliffe Museum had had a somewhat chequered existence. The collections were transferred from Water Lane to the Public Library, which opened in 1907, and were housed on the upper floor. However, as the *Radcliffe Times* (29 April 1949) reported:

In February 1934 a suggestion was accepted that it be transferred to Close Park in order to accommodate a juvenile department in the library, and it is not without interest that visitors to it at Close Park were at the time more numerous there than at the more central library.

Therefore by the middle of the 1930s, Radcliffe Museum had moved to Close House in Close Park, Radcliffe. This would appear to have been a positive development; Close House was a fine building in an impressive setting.

Unfortunately the Museum did not become a permanent feature of post-war Radcliffe. As Minute 814 of Radcliffe Borough Council's Public Library Sub-Committee of 3 March 1949 recorded: 'The Librarian reported on the possibility of the early termination of the lease at Close House and the consequent evacuation of the Museum'. Worse still, Minute 957 of the General Purposes Committee (28 March 1949) resolved: '...that this Council very reluctantly consider that the Museum should be disposed of with the exception of specimens of local interest and that the Public Library Committee be empowered to deal with the matter'.

Accordingly, display furniture and non-local material was offered to interested parties. Much of the collections went to other museums and educational institutions, and in a letter to Radcliffe's Town Clerk in November 1949, Frank Sunderland, the Borough Librarian confirmed that '...on Thursday last, 24 November we



Re-opening of Bury Museum, December, 1990. In the Co-operative Store (left to right) Councillor Brian Rigby, Councillor Monty Adler, Mayor, Alan Warhurst, Director of Manchester Museum, and Colin Billingham, Curator of Bury Museum.

vacated the premises at Close House...'

The remaining museum artefacts were returned to Radcliffe Library, and later transferred to Bury during the mid-1970s, when they were incorporated in the permanent collections. By this time, there had been developments in personnel within the Metropolitan Borough of Bury, which included a significant increase in curatorial staff at the Art Gallery and Museum. As the *Rossendale Free Press* (11 May 1974) reported:

Instead of a single Assistant Curator to look after Bury Museum and Art Gallery, there is now a Keeper of Social History, Derek Janes, and a Museum Assistant, Ken Howarth, to see to the museum, while on 20 May, Michael Millward will take charge of the Art Gallery, as Keeper of Art.

It is worth noting at this point that the Metropolitan Borough of Bury might had they had the good fortune to have been able to incorporate a second museum in 1974. Unfortunately this did not come to pass, for this particular museum, based in Ramsbottom, would already have seemed to have gone by 1869! In an article entitled 'The Museum at Barwood House', the *Bury Times* (31 May 1856) reported:

We have great pleasure in calling attention to the fact that the Rev. Andrew McLean M.A., Minister of St. Andrew's Church, Ramsbottom, threw open his extensive and valuable museum during the whole of Whit week to all parties, whether belonging to the neighbourhood, or from a distance, who might be wishful to examine it... indeed the mansion itself, once the residence of the Grants, may be termed a museum — and we understand that Mr. McLean is constantly adding to the curiosities which it contains.

The Reverend W. Hume Elliot refers to Dr. McLean being required to vacate Barwood House: 'With no suitable house available, it necessitated the breaking up of his natural history museum, and much else fitted to occasion pain'.⁷ It is a great tragedy that this collection does not appear to have survived. If Bury had been able to preserve a personal museum of this type from the mid-nineteenth century, it would have complemented Thomas Wrigley's art collection perfectly.

Over the last decade, Bury has concentrated on creating museum displays and mounting exhibitions to attract both local visitors as well as those from elsewhere. Recent ventures undertaken by the staff of Bury Art Gallery and Museum which contain a 'museum' element have included 'Steam Up' (1980), a display of model engines; 'Spirit of the Sea' (1982), devoted to Marine Art (including works from the Royal Collections) and ship models; the Peel Bi-Centennial Exhibition (1988), which celebrated the birth of Sir Robert Peel, second Baronet, in Bury on 5 February 1788; and 'Always Carry Your Gas Mask' (1989), which looked at life within the locality during World War II.

The museum now principally collects local and social history, and this policy is reflected in the permanent displays. In 1897, a three-year programme of extensive renovation to the Art Gallery and Museum was undertaken. Major roof repairs were carried out, and internal redecoration took place. The restored galleries on the upper floor were revealed to the public in August 1990, and a completely refurbished museum in the basement was formally re-opened by Alan Warhurst CBE, Director of the Manchester University Museum, in December 1990.



Catalogue cover for 'Steam Up', 1980.

New displays include a cobbler's shop from Whitefield, with working machinery, a working railway layout of Bury, a large Co-operative Store which the visitor can walk into and see the museum's extensive collections of 'Co-op' goods, and a representation of the surgery of Dr. Clarence Lees, a general practitioner in Bury from 1913 until 1958. Other topics covered in the museum include royal commemorative ware, local archaeology, toys, photography, fire-fighting, local brewing industries and local transport. Of particular interest in the latter category is a superb Austin 8 Delivery Van, dating from 1946, and still in working order. Formerly used by James Holden & Son, Limited, a towelling manufacturer based in Ramsbottom, it was purchased by the museum in May

1989, just in time to participate in 'Museums On The Move'. This national historical vehicle rally was held at Duxford, Cambridge on 30 July 1989 to celebrate National Museums Day. The van is now back in the museum, parked outside the Co-operative Store. Why not visit Bury and see it, together with all the other attractions at Bury Art Gallery and Museum? The original entrance and exit turnstiles are still in place! Bury Art Gallery and Museum is now part of the Leisure Services Department of the Metropolitan Borough of Bury, and is situated in Moss Street. Admission is free. Bury Art Gallery and Museum is open to the public from 10.00 a.m. until 5.00 p.m., Tuesday to Saturday inclusive. For full details of current events, telephone 061-705-5878.

NOTES

1. Pevsner, N., *The Buildings of England, South Lancashire* (1969) p.98
2. *Radcliffe Diamond Jubilee Exhibition: Catalogue of Pictures* (1897) p.66
3. *Art Gallery and Library Committee Minutes*, 28 May 1903
4. *Art Gallery and Library Committee Minutes*, 17 July 1906
5. *Art Gallery and Library Committee Minutes*, 17 July 1906
6. *Art Gallery and Library Committee Minutes*, 17 July 1906
7. Elliot, W. H., *The Country and Church of the Cheeryble Brothers* (1893) p. 288

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