

WIGAN'S HISTORY SHOP

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In August 1996 phase II of Wigan's History Shop was completed (phase I had opened four years earlier, in the former reference library). The story of the History Shop, however, cannot be told in isolation from the history of Wigan Library. The story in fact goes back well over a century — to the early 1870s, when Thomas Taylor, the wealthy owner of the Victoria Cotton Mills in Wallgate, Wigan, offered the town £12,000 to pay for a library building. A few years later Dr Joseph Winnard, a surgeon to the Wigan Poor Law Union, died at the age of fifty-three, leaving a further £12,000 in his will to pay for books. The way was now clear for the town to have its own library.

Foundation of the library

The architect Alfred Waterhouse was entrusted with the design of the new library building. Waterhouse often worked in the style of the Gothic Revival, and is principally remembered for his educational and civic buildings such as Manchester Town Hall (1868) and the Natural History Museum (1873–81). The new library was built on the site of Wigan Grammar School in Rodney Street. The library had two main floors. On the ground floor was an entrance hall (decorated in the style of a mosque), a lending library and a newsroom. On the first floor was the reference library and a room to house the meetings of the Corporation's Public Library Committee. There was also a flat for the custodian or caretaker-cum-security officer.

The Library opened on 7 May 1878. The first librarian was twenty-seven-year-old Henry Tennyson Folkard, previously sub-librarian at the Royal Academy of Arts. His task was to acquire and organise the libraries' book stock. From the first there was a determination to make the reference section far better than those in other towns the size of Wigan. Only books of rarity and quality were acquired. Specialists of national repute were consulted, and their advice taken in a selection of books. The result was a reference library that was representative of thought and knowledge in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and which also combined a large number of books of bibliographical and historic interest. After the first eight months work there were 15,300 volumes in the reference library and 6,808 in the lending library. There was some criticism of imbalance, but this was stifled by the general enthusiasm for the status achieved by the Reference Library. In any case, the most popular department was the newsroom in which current newspapers and periodicals were held. This had to be extended in 1892 by having an annexe built on to the original building.

Sunday opening

Interestingly, from the first, the newsroom was open on Sundays, from 26 January 1879, to persons holding special tickets issued by the Library Committee. Wigan was almost unique in having its library open on a Sunday — only Manchester and Birmingham did likewise. Yet there would



appear to have been virtually no opposition to Sunday opening in Wigan, as it was the wish of the donor, Thomas Taylor. And Sunday opening was considered a great success — attendance in 1880, for example, totalled 10,572.

The library grows

As the reputation of the Reference Library grew, donations, of manuscripts, prints, paintings and medals, as well as books, came flooding in. These came not only from wealthy local inhabitants, such as the bibliophilic Ludovic, Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, but also from corporate bodies such as the Corporation of the City of London and the British Museum. Significantly, the latter gave to Wigan Library on an annual basis various publications such as its numerous catalogues of science and art — a privilege extended to very few libraries. Dr Axon, President of the Library Association, declared that Wigan Library “was regarded in many ways as a model library... and an institution of which Wigan had every reason to be proud”.

In 1901 the whole library contained 55,000 volumes, of which 39,700 were in the reference library. Records were kept of books issued and readers who visited the reference library. In 1905 the most numerous classes using this department were students (3,198), commercial travellers (3,435) and colliers (2,862). The commercial travellers need not necessarily have been of a studious disposition. As some wit remarked, they probably just popped in to consult the railway timetables.

The collier and the clergyman

The colliers, however, were a different matter. They were under-represented in that checkweighmen, firemen and under-lookers, who would normally be classed as colliery workers, were not included in the figures quoted. Folkard always told his library assistants not to underestimate or patronise the Wigan colliers, and to illustrate his point, told the following story, which he personally witnessed.

One day a visiting clergyman called into the reference library and was pleased to see there a collier whom he recognised as having attended a lecture he had given the previous evening. The clergyman strode up to the collier and said in a loud voice, “My good man, I saw you listening to my discourse last night with great intelligence. I’m glad to see you here improving your mind. What are you reading?”

The collier looked up at the clergyman but made no reply, whereupon the clergyman repeated his question. Again the collier looked at the clergyman, but said nothing.

Exasperated, the clergyman turned to the librarian and said “Is this man deaf?”

The collier then gave a jerk with his thumb to indicate a notice behind him, on which was printed in large letters the word “Silence”. The clergyman, embarrassed and confused, made a hasty departure.

End of an era

In August 1916, Henry Folkard was killed by a runaway horse as he was crossing Mesnes Street. He was succeeded by Arthur J. Hawkes, who came from a Dorset family. After a spell working in Bournemouth Library he was appointed Borough Librarian for Wigan in 1919. At the time of his retirement he had written twenty-one works on a wide variety of subjects ranging from an anti-suffragist

pamphlet entitled *The Degradation of Womanhood* to a book on the clockmakers of Wigan and their clocks. But Hawkes was primarily a historian, and like Folkard before him was a fellow of the prestigious *Society of Antiquaries*. It was largely on Hawkes’s initiative that the muniments of local landowning families such as the Ince Andertons and the Marklands were deposited in the Wigan Archives.

Reforms

April 1950 saw the retirement of A.J. Hawkes, and the Libraries Committee followed what had become a tradition by appointing another historian as Borough Librarian. H.H.G. Arthur, like Hawkes before him, set about making reforms, withdrawing thousands of outdated books, and setting up a special commercial section in the library. He complained bitterly about the lack of a proper museum and art gallery in the town! Prophetic words, indeed!

Arthur’s successor was Noel Willis, who saw the library service through the difficult period of local government reorganisation in 1974, when Wigan Metropolitan Borough was born.

April 1990 saw the lending and reference libraries leaving the building they had occupied for over a century and moving to the New Town Hall in Library Street (originally the premises of Wigan Technical College). The local history and genealogical collections, however, remained behind.

The heritage service moves in

The vacation of the building as a library offered the recently formed Wigan Heritage Service its opportunity. The Service had been formed in 1989 — a much-needed amalgamation of the Museums, Archives and Local History sections. All three had previously lacked a high public profile — the Museums Service even lacked a museum after the closure of the town’s short-lived Powell Museum in 1986 — but already the formation of the new Service was paying dividends in this respect. And what better building to house the new Service than Waterhouse’s fine, historic library, with its tradition of historians as librarians, who collected historic artefacts and archives as well as books?

Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain the entire building — accommodation was at a premium at the time, and it was decided that the Careers Service (not a lot in common!) should be allocated most of the ground floor. At least the Heritage Service got by far the best area — the former Reference Library on the first floor. We had to tread carefully, as we were moving into a listed building. It would not have looked very good if the Heritage Services Manager came to blows with the Authority’s Conservation Officer! But things went very smoothly. The original bookshelves, for example, proved easily convertible into exhibition bays, with panels suspended on pegs inserted into the original Victorian holes. (A word of warning — do not ever assume that any two Victorian bookcases are the same width, as North West Museums Service found to their cost when fitting the panels). The research area was concentrated into the end section of the gallery, thus freeing the long central area for the minor relocation of two large Victorian showcases for the display of books and archives. The original enquiry desk became the reception/retail outlet. The former Chief Librarian’s Office/Committee room became the new home for six staff. The top-floor custodian’s flat, which had long since been used for storage, once again had a kitchen and lounge/dining room — now called the staff rest-room! The former ground-floor staff workroom became a meeting/lecture room.



View of Reference Library at about noon on Thursday, 6 April 1939 — twenty-one students.

What's in a name?

In this way this fine Victorian building was transformed, with the utmost sympathy and sensitivity, from a library into the History Shop. Why the History Shop? The Heritage Centre was the first thought for the flagship of the new Heritage Service — but there already was a Heritage Centre at Wigan Pier, and indeed in many other places in the country. It was clear that use of the word 'Heritage' would only cause confusion, and so it was replaced by 'History'. After all, what we were doing was setting up a centre of excellence where visitors could find out about all aspects of their local history — was it not a one-stop shop, where visitors could enjoy an exhibition, carry out some research themselves, and hopefully make a purchase? The title of History Shop seemed a good one. It was certainly the first in the country — and, as far as I know, still the only attraction of that name. For marketing purposes, the name has proved invaluable — most people around Wigan have at least heard of the History Shop, even if they are all not necessarily fully aware of what goes on there.

What then, did the History Shop offer when it opened in 1992?

1) A high-quality permanent display, entitled 'Founded on Coal', telling the story of the local area from the earliest times to the present day. The underlying theme of the display is coal and how its presence has shaped the whole history of the area — from its formation millions of years ago right up to the closure in 1992 of Bickershaw, the last working colliery in our area. The wheel has gone

full circle. The winding wheels will turn no more.

- 2) A display of original archives in showcases. (Until then, it had not been possible to mount such a display).
- 3) A small temporary exhibition gallery for in-house and travelling exhibitions, as well as the display of art.
- 4) A study/research area — a centre of excellence for local historian and family historian alike. By incorporating the splendid Wigan Local History collection, and microform copies of the most requested archives (the archives proper and Leigh Local History collection remained in Leigh Town Hall and library respectively), the History Shop can offer a comprehensive resource bank for most researchers.
- 5) A retail outlet, selling a wide range of heritage-related merchandise, including local history and genealogical books, teaching packs, prints and photographs, and a wide range of tasteful souvenirs.
- 6) A meeting/lecture room, with facilities for public lectures and displays. A monthly lecture programme was introduced from the outset. The room is also available for hire to local societies and groups.

Early successes

The History Shop was at once a success. Just as Wigan Heritage Service has given its constituent parts — Museums, Archives and Local History — a far higher profile, so 'History Shop' has proved an eminently marketable title, for the flagship of a service with which so many people —

local government officers, councillors, the public — are now familiar. What a contrast with a Museum Service without a Museum; a Record Office — 'What's that?', so many people, even within the Council, used to ask; or a Local History Library overshadowed by its parent Reference Library.

The Guardian gave the History Shop a half page — quite an occasion — and the local media did us proud. It was used by the BBC for a Victorian children's serial — 'by far the best surviving example of a Victorian library interior in the North West'. And it was short-listed for Museum of the Year Award:

this charming building houses a new kind of approach to disseminating information about the whole spectrum of the history of the area. A library, complete with old metal walkways and alcoves lined with books, occupies the first floor, whilst below are interesting displays ranging from the fossils in coal, Wigan's first major industry, to the modern domestic interior. Not only are there artefacts, but also original documents and the opportunity to learn how to do one's own genealogical research.

The temporary exhibition programme got off to an excellent start with a display — the first in the town for over twenty years — of the work of Wigan artist Lawrence Isherwood who, since his death in 1989, has become a figure of national importance in the art world. This was followed — in complete contrast but in keeping with the History Shop's policy of offering something for everyone — by *The Homes of Football*. Other temporary exhibitions have included: *George Formby*, a series of displays to celebrate the year of Drama, 1994; *When Push Comes to Shove* — images of Rugby League; exhibitions to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of VE and VJ day; and a display of paintings by local artist Gerald Rickards.

The response from the public was excellent. Remarks such as 'brilliant', 'good memories', 'a great treasure', 'excellent', 'fascinating', 'full of nostalgia', 'beautifully annotated and presented', 'an excellent use of this fine building' and 'interesting — even for children' appeared in the visitor book. There were over 12,000 visitors to the History Shop during the first year — well in excess of expectations. It was encouraging to welcome a good number of school and college classes to view the exhibitions — including some from across the Pennines! The public lectures were well-attended. Family history workshops and open days have proved an outstanding success. Each member of the public is assured of a half hour's individual attention from a genealogist — a guarantee which is, I believe, a new and original development.

Past Forward

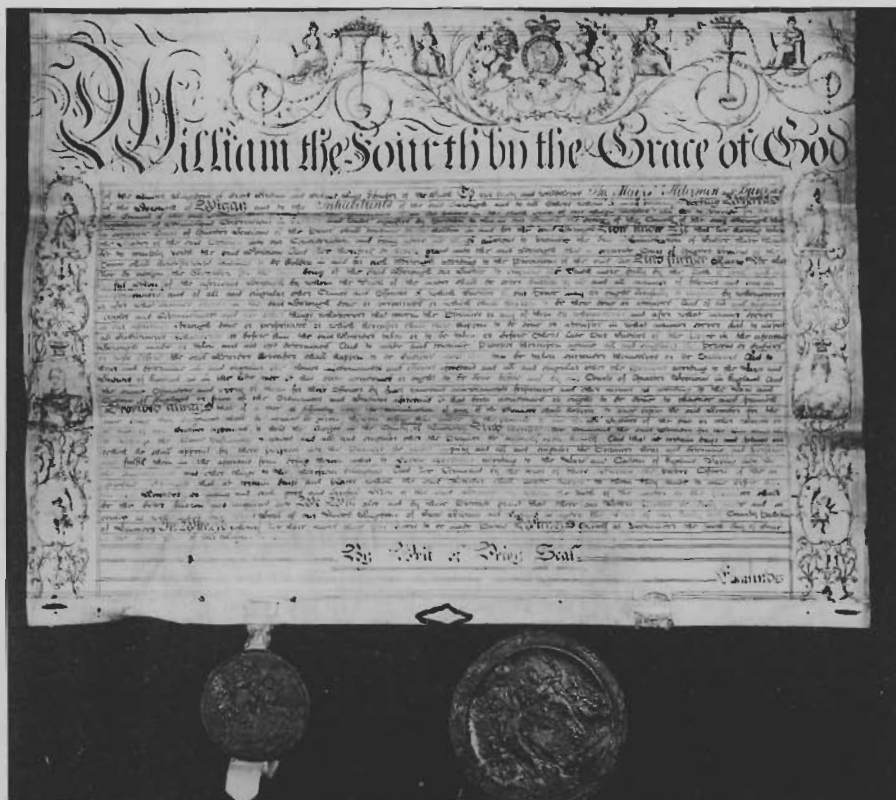
The high-profile and popularity of the History Shop have been increased by another Heritage Service initiative — 'Past Forward'. This is a high-quality newsletter, produced three times a year — FREE! It began with eight pages in 1991, but now has grown to twenty — and the special Charter Anniversary issue in summer 1996 even had twenty-four! It has built up a mailing list all over the world. Its winning recipe of local history articles, reminiscences and news (virtually all supplied by readers, which makes my job, as editor, appreciably easier), local society news, readers' letters and, of course, what's happening in the History Shop and other Heritage Service outlets, produces a constant stream of complimentary correspondence and generous contributions, both written and financial.

The History Shop has also proved a justification and successful outlet for an ambitious Heritage Service publications programme. Since 1992, a range of in-house publications has been produced, on local subjects such as *The Legend of Mab's Cross* and *Wigan at War*, and on local areas. Guides to Genealogical Sources, The Archives and the Wigan Charters have recently been produced. Photographic histories of Wigan and Leigh have been published by national publishers.

We won the Lottery!

Nevertheless, all was not well! After the initial euphoria, it had become clear by 1995 that the failure to secure the ground floor was a major hindrance to the long-term success of the History Shop. Access was via a long flight of stairs — impossible for some, and a very strong deterrent to others. The temporary exhibition gallery was really rather small. There was still nowhere for the best of the Heritage Service's fine art collection to be exhibited. Reception and the shop were both on the first floor — hardly conducive to a friendly welcome or good sales.

In 1995 the fortunes of the History Shop rose dramatically. The year began with the announcement that the Careers Service was moving out! We had cohabited on fairly friendly terms, but were hardly sorry to see them go. The way was now open



Charter of William IV (10 June 1836) granting a separate court of quarter sessions for Wigan borough.

for the History Shop to take over the entire building — funding permitting. There was no money in the Authority's coffers — but fortuitously Dr Monica Wickham, last surviving daughter of Victorian Wigan vicar Rev William Wickham, left a legacy of over £60,000 to the Heritage Service as a thank-you for preserving and promoting her father's memory and his splendid photographs of the town. This was the platform which was needed to apply for National Lottery funding. In November 1995 the History Shop was awarded the sum of £201,000 — the first within Wigan MBC, and the first museum in the North West to receive National Lottery funding. The fact that 1996 was the 750th anniversary of Wigan's first royal charter (it is one of the four oldest boroughs in Lancashire), and that the Heritage service was to be responsible for co-ordinating the celebrations, further ensured that it was going to be quite a year!



Portrait of Charles II within the initial letter of his charter granted to Wigan Corporation, 16 May 1662.

Unfortunately, various administrative formalities delayed the commencement of works. The opening exhibition in the new gallery was to be, naturally, Charter 96 — a celebration of Wigan's 750th anniversary, which simply had to be open by the end of August, the date of the actual granting of the first Charter in 1246. By May, work had still not begun — and the installation of the exhibition could only begin once the conversion works had been completed! Only in mid-June did work commence — looking back, how on earth did we manage it? The Authority's Architects Department, North West Museum Service and the various contractors, along with the Heritage Service staff, worked absolute wonders to ensure that the History Shop phase II and the Charter Exhibition opened on time on 28 August. Not that most of us had opportunity to enjoy the Bank Holiday weekend! In just ten weeks, part of the roof was replaced, new internal walls built, security windows, cameras and alarms fitted — and a major exhibition installed!

The New Wickham Gallery

The first floor — renamed the Taylor Gallery in memory of Thomas Taylor who provided the building in the first place — is largely unchanged. The research centre, 'Founded on Coal' and the small temporary exhibition gallery remain — the latter currently has on display some archival treasures on loan from Wigan's twin town, Angers, in the Loire Valley. But what a transformation on the ground floor, in the Wickham Gallery (named after Dr Monica Wickham whose bequest made the whole development possible)!

The History Shop is now open to all — visitors enter by an automatic door and ramp, and find themselves immediately at reception and the shop. The first thing they see are the paintings in Wigan's first traditional Art Gallery. On display are seven of the Heritage Service's finest paintings, all recently conserved. Four are Victorian, of national interest and importance: *Michaelmas Geese* by Alice Mary Havers (1850–1890); *Not A Moment To Lose* by G. Smetham-Jones (1888); *Simpletons* by Sir Luke Fildes (1843–1927); *The Falls of Tivoli* by William James Muller (1837). The other three are of particular local significance: *A Portrait of Sir Roger and Lady Bradshaigh* by Edward Haytley (1746)

— the Bradshaighs were owners of Haigh Hall, near Wigan — the hall can be seen in the distance; *A portrait of Joseph Taylor Winnard* by Charles Mercier (c.1878) — Winnard bequeathed £12,000 for the purchase of books for the new Wigan Library; *A portrait of Thomas Taylor* by James Archer (1823–1904) — Taylor donated the Library to the town of Wigan.

The main part of the Wickham Gallery is presently occupied by the Charter 750th Anniversary exhibition. This begins in a dimly-lit room, where all eight surviving charters are on display in their full glory, together for the first time for many years. Visitors then move into the second section of the exhibition, which tells the story of 750 years of local government, complete with tableaux and sound effects. The exhibition is accompanied by an audio-visual presentation, *The Wigan Story*.

A further highlight of the Wickham Gallery is the Charter Mural — a splendid 37ft work stretching across the full width of the History Shop. The Mural was painted by local artist Gerald Rickards as a result of a commission by Wigan Heritage Service, and depicts buildings in Wigan past, present and even future. It is hoped that the Mural will be a legacy for the next 750 years!

Finally, the new Gallery also incorporates a small disabled study area, for those who are unable to manage the stairs.

The new Wickham Gallery, in only a few months, has proved an outstanding success. Visitor numbers have increased considerably, while custom in the shop has more than doubled. A look through the visitor book provides further encouragement — 'really amazing', 'great AV show', 'a fine tribute to a fine town', 'a gem' and 'very educational' are just a few of the many comments made.

Now that the History Shop has so much more to offer, school tours have been arranged in conjunction with the nearby Town Hall. These have been fully booked. Lectures have been held in the art gallery, which has even proved itself an ideal venue for carol concerts, literary recitals, dance and other functions. The audio-visual presentation is now available on video (the first run was sold out in a fortnight).



The Whickham Gallery.

The future

So far, so good. 1997 promises to be another exciting year. Workshops on the Charter Mural are planned, as are further ones on family history. We hope to capitalise on the potential of the Art Gallery for recitals and other events. We are looking at the possibility of forming the 'Friends of the History Shop'.

But in many ways this is only a beginning. We have a very long way to go in realising the full educational potential of the History Shop, for example, more teaching packs are needed. Many of the collections are in desperate need of computerisation — and perhaps none more so than the huge photographic collection. We need to build in a rolling programme for the conservation and display of more of the fine art collection. More links are needed with the local community with a view towards encouraging the mounting

of a number of small exhibitions by local artists and craftsmen.

Nevertheless, at the risk of sounding slightly biased, I believe the History Shop has already proved an outstanding success. Through it, Wigan Heritage Service has developed almost unrecognisably since the dark days of the late 1980s and early 1990s. How appropriate that a splendid Victorian building, with its traditions of historical scholarship and resources, should now house an up-to-date centre of excellence for historical interpretation and research — a one-stop shop for anyone with even the slightest interest in their local history and heritage.

The Wigan History Shop is open: Monday, 10am–7pm, Tuesday to Friday, 10am–5pm; and Saturdays, 10am–1pm. For further information contact: The History Shop, Library Street, Wigan, WN1 1NU; Tel 01942 828128