

THE SANDOWN FREE LIBRARY

By Dave Bambrough 2011 (part one)

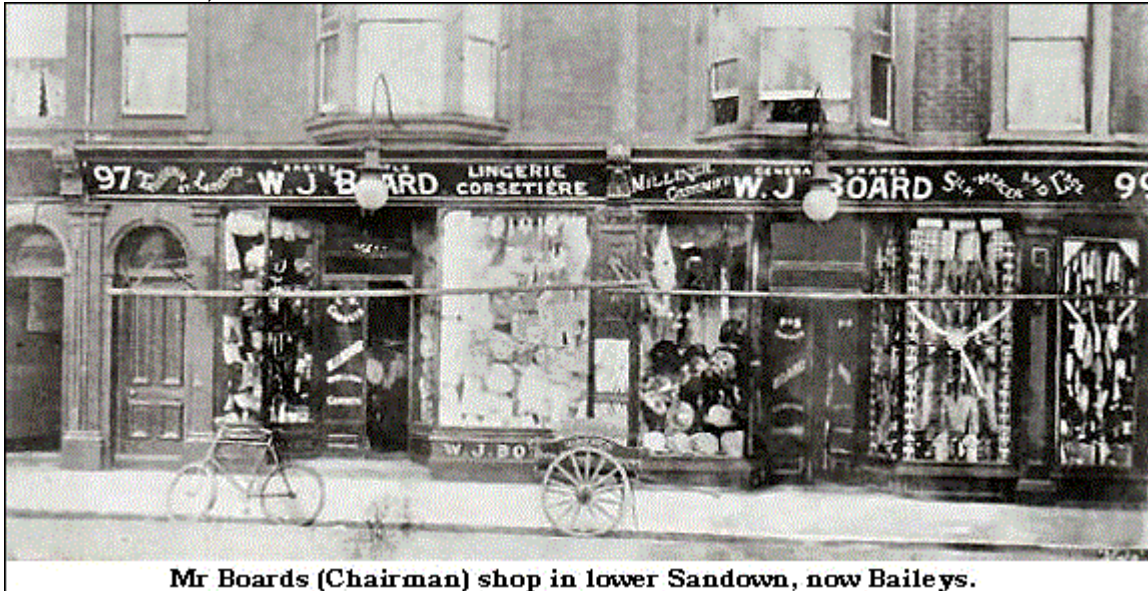
Having served the residents and visitors to Sandown for close on 106 years it seems incredulous that the powers that be should consider closing it. Even the last minute reprieve to shorter opening hours is in the opinion of most, totally unjustified. Many hours of embittered discussion took place before the final decision was made to accept Andrew Carnegie's very generous offer to advance £2000 in 1905 for educational purposes by way of a library to the people of Sandown. This is equivalent to nearly £190,000 in 2010. Surely common sense must prevail with the library remaining open for the purpose it was constructed, relaxed reading and education. Now, a brief insight into how it came to fruition. Here is the early story.

Andrew Carnegie was born in Dunfermline, Scotland and migrated to the United States as a child with his parents. His first job in the United States was as a factory worker in a bobbin factory. Later on he became a bill logger for the owner of the company. Soon after he became a messenger boy. Eventually he progressed up the ranks of a telegraph company. He then built Pittsburgh's Carnegie Steel Company, which later merged with Elbert H. Gary's Federal Steel Company and several smaller companies to create U.S. Steel. By the 1890s, the company was the largest and most profitable industrial enterprise in the world. Carnegie sold it in 1901 for \$480 million to J.P. Morgan, who created U.S. Steel. Carnegie devoted the remainder of his life to large-scale philanthropy with special emphasis on local libraries, world peace, education and scientific research. His life has often been referred to as a true "rags to riches" story.



In June 1903 the Sandown Urban Council set up a small sub-committee to investigate the possibilities of obtaining a loan from Mr Carnegie for which to build a library and the Clerk was instructed to draft and send a letter to him for details of the scheme.

(As with every deal Carnegie made, there were strings attached, even to this charitable act. Carnegie offered interested towns enough cash to build the library, usually offering an amount per resident. In return, the town had to agree to pay an amount equal to 10 percent of that gift each year for upkeep, utilities and books. In smaller towns, this could be a serious burden).



Mr Boards (Chairman) shop in lower Sandown, now Baileys.

Shortly after that meeting the library committee elected Mr Board Chairman (Boards preceded Baileys in lower Sandown High Street) who reported that up to the time of the meeting no reply had been received from Mr Carnegie. By now, most were taken with the idea and hoped the request would be a favourable one.

By July the "necessary forms" required by Carnegie were filled in and returned for his consideration. A probable site and the necessary costs were the next consideration.

However, the feeling within the Council Chambers was far from unanimous over the idea. A Mr Way, seconding the proposal said he hoped that the scheme would not be carried out! This was also the opinion of a Mr Armstrong; it was however, although far from unanimous, adopted for investigation at this early stage.

The August 1903 committee meeting had received a reply from Mr Carnegie offering £2000 for which to build a Library. Three sites had been mooted, one in Albert Road, available for £300 with £15 ground rent; another in Beachfield Road at £150 and £10 ground rent; with a third in the High Street. The committee were hopeful that the location of the site would be resolved prior to the next meeting. Once again the report was adopted, even the wavering Mr Way was now convinced that it would be a boon to the town.

By December 1903 most Councillors now realised that the offer of a paid for Library was probably the single momentous happening that had ever happened to Sandown.

Mr Way obviously still had regrets over the matter, once again strongly condemning the scheme preferring that local money should be spent upon necessary matters such as a groyne, also envisaging that a penny on the rates would be required to support the cost of running the library. He was not the only dissenting member; Colonel Clayton (Sandown member) thought that a penny rate would not be near enough to support the place. Annoyance regarding the idea was also fermenting amongst the other Lake members who also rejected the idea on the grounds that Lake had a good reading room, which as far as they were concerned was quite sufficient for their parishioners.

The eventual outcome of this meeting was to call a public meeting the following week and to poll the town by leaving papers for signatures to be set up a few days later. The result of the poll was an overwhelming majority; the residents of the district had voted their approval of the scheme. Unfortunately, the Chairman stated that in one ward there had been an adverse vote. (Lake by a majority of 51)

In February 1904 the Board moved that the Public Libraries act of 1892 be adopted and that it would come into operation in 1904.

(This protected certain behaviour in libraries and reading-rooms that were considered an offence, liable on summary conviction to a fine of up to forty shillings. The Act extended to any public library established under the Public Libraries Act 1892, as well as to a library or reading-room maintained by any Industrial or Provident Society, any Friendly Society, or any registered trades union. The Act prohibited, where it was "to the annoyance or disturbance" of any other user - disorderly behaviour, the use of obscene or abusive language, gambling or betting, and persistently remaining within the library beyond its stated closing hours. It applied only to England and Wales).

At this juncture Mr New (Lake member) proposed as an amendment, that the Lake ward should not be included. He would not be doing his duty to Lake ratepayers unless he said, as they did "No". He did not consider Lake would reap any benefit from the scheme therefore Sandown members should not be voting to spend Lake ratepayers money. He highlighted the fact that the main road and sewer repairs in Lake had been postponed because the council were not able to afford the cost (nothing seems to have changed in over 100 years)

Mr Way would not give up and stated that Lake should spend its money to a much better advantage. He then moved an amendment "That the act be adopted, excluding the Lake ward. (There had been a refusal of an offer, Tiverton in Devon had refused £2,250 from Mr



Carnegie).

Continual discord continued throughout the meeting with such comments as; the Library might do for Mr Boards (the Chairman) employees who had nowhere else to go, but it would be of no use to working men generally; It would not be of any advantage to Lake residents who should not be expected to be charitable to Sandown; Neither would it be of advantage to visitors to the town who could obtain any books they required from Martins Library. (No 2 High Street, pictured left).

Mr Way continued stating that he opposed the whole idea on principal, commenting that he did not think it was required within the district. Another Lake member went as far as to imply that Lake gained no overall benefit from their union with Sandown and could well survive independantly. (To be cont).

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One of the Lake members thought that if Ferncliff (half way along Beachfield Road) became the library location the Lake members might be more inclined to vote for the scheme. One Sandown member expressed the opinion that the library would be a failure, likening it to be "a dead horse"!

The Chairman stated that he regretted the adverse comments saying that there was more than roads and drains to be catered for within a growing town. The town he thought had stood still long enough and must be lifted out of its rut. He prayed the Council would not be so short sighted as to reject the offer. The motion to procede was again carried.

By late February 1904 the question of the site had become of prime importance. Two had been dismissed, one in Winchester Road and one in Ferncliff was also ruled out due to it being home to the Town Band on occasions. The required silence accorded to a library would be at a premium with a band in the near vicinity. Most importantly Mr Carnegie's offer only applied to a new building, not a patched up old structure.

The June 1904 committee meeting heard three reports. The first and most important was an offer, by way of a gift from Mr Alexander Keller (builder of the Savoy Hotel) of the present site that the Library now stands on. The committee recommended that subject to Mr Carnegie's approval, Mr Keller's kind offer be accepted.

TO BUILDERS & CONTRACTORS.

THE SANDOWN URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL are prepared to receive TENDERS for the erection of a Public Library at Sandown.

Drawings and Specification can be seen at the Offices of the Architect, Mr. James Newman, Thornton, Sandown, from whom copies of quantities can be obtained, when ready, on payment of a deposit of 5s.

Tenders to be sent in to the undersigned not later than 4 p.m. on Tuesday, October 10th next, endorsed "Tender for Library."

The Council do not bind themselves to accept the lowest or any tender.

(Signed)
WILLIAM H. WOOLDRIDGE,
Clerk to the Council.

September 22nd, 1904.

Discord over the matter continued however, fractiously at times. The Lake contingent continued to voice opinion against the new library, accompanied by one or two Sandown members. Mr Bayliss a Lake member argued that if Mr Keller's offer were accepted the library would be nearer Yaverland and Brading than Lake? A comment from a Mr Dore was that if Lake people did not know what was good for them, they must be taught!!

There had been other site offers nearer to Lake, one from Lord Alverstone in Beachfield Road and the Town Hall. Despite the opposition the the motion was carried, 10-3 in favour, with one abstention. The new library was now to go ahead, at last.

In September the draft lease of the proposed site from Mr Keller to the Council for 999 years was read, with a copy sent to Mr Carnegie. As of yet official plans for

the building had not yet been drawn. Pencil drawn sketches had been forwarded to Mr Keller for approval, whereupon his acceptance would then require proper drawings.

The following month the controversy continued, eventually sanity reigned, but not before the following criticism had been levelled. A letter had been received from Mr Keller asking the Council if they would reconsider their decision as to whom the contract had been awarded. He said it had come to his knowledge that Mr James (who's tender had been accepted) had been informed by a member of the Council that the tender must be under £1800 to be successful. Also a desire of Mr Keller was that the contract should be awarded to Sandown Builders and that Sandown workmen should be employed on the work. (When the time came, many were.)



The fence donated by Alexander Keller.

The Council instructed the Clerk to reply to Mr Keller stating that they could not reconsider Mr James tender as the matter had advanced so far. It was also a matter of common knowledge that £200 of Mr Carnegie's gift of £2000 had to be provided for fixtures, & architect's fees, etc. Therefore the Council felt justified in accepting Mr James tender, not one of £135 above. Despite that, the Architect (Mr James Newman) reported that Mr Keller had kindly agreed to give the Council the wooden fence around the Library site.

Plans were prepared, and in early January 1905 the stones commemorating the generosity of Mr. Andrew Carnegie and Mr. Alexander Keller

were laid. The Carnegie stone was laid by Major J. E. B. Sedy, D.S.O., who then represented the Isle of Wight in Parliament, who said that he hoped this building would be the gateway to knowledge and freedom for all the inhabitants of this fair town for many years to come. The stone recording Alexander Keller's generosity to the town was laid by Mr. V. J. Board, who was Vice-Chairman of the District Council during the year, and was also the proposer of the resolution making an appeal to Mr. Carnegie for financial assistance. By early May 1904 the construction of the building was well underway. A third payment of £400 had been made to the builder.

Lord Alverstone (Lord Chief Justice of England) expressed his pleasure at being invited to perform the opening ceremony, which he would gladly do if the date was fixed for a Saturday prior to August 12th. Mr Dore (Councillor) expressed gratitude for Lord Alverstone's gesture and suggested that Mr Carnegie might like to be present. (Not to be).

A further Council meeting in June 1905 recommended the following; that a pathway be paved around the new building, lighting installed throughout the building by electricity (rather than gas), advertisements for a curator and librarian be placed in local papers and that a further £100 be paid to the contractor. By now the Council had received 39 applications for librarian. The library buildings were recommended to be insured for £2000.

As requested by Lord Alverstone the grand opening took place one week prior to August 12th on Saturday 29th July 1905. Mr T. A. Wright, Chairman of the District Council, presided at the ceremony which took place in the public reading room with many other Island and local dignitaries in attendance.

By October the total number of books within the library was 2,745. Further alterations and additions during 1906 were; Mr H. Atrill was engaged to cut more deeply the words "Free Library" over the entrance. A ladies room was due to be opened during June, July, August and September, until eight o'clock each day, and until dark during the remaining months of the year. Up until June 21st 1906 108 people had used the reference Library, whilst the total number of borrowers were 494 and a total of 6,233 books had been issued. In addition to public reading and writing rooms, the building included a reference library and a most interesting and instructive collection of fossils gathered from around the Island, which commanded the attention of all interested in geology. (Now housed in the new Dinosaur Isle situated at the Eastern end of Culver Parade.)

Within a few weeks donations were flooding in. As well as Mr Carnegie's £2000, there was £25 from a Miss Richardson, (equates to £2370 in 2010) towards the purchase of books. Mr T. A. Wright gave £10 and 140 books. The Rev. Storrs, 24 volumes and a bound volume of "Quiver". A Mr Parsons offered a present of a 2-dial clock and 300 books. Mr Board (Chairman) and Mr Bynner promised £5 each towards the purchase of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The committee welcomed any offer of books or money to assist with the purchase of books or to meet current expenses. It was decided that a box would be placed in the entrance hall for voluntary donations. (This was the beginning, how will it end?)



An early photograph of the library complete with the Jubilee Fountain.