

## Some key dates

**1850** – Public Libraries Act.

**1868** – Council agreed to set up a library after rejecting a proposal in 1861

**1870** - Mr James Yates, the first Chief Librarian, was appointed

**1872** –The Central Lending Library began to lend books

**1884** – Current building opened

**1909** – Open Access introduced in the Reference Library (ie. Users were allowed to browse and select from the shelves). This wasn't completed across all Leeds' Libraries until 1933 (New Wortley and Holbeck branches).

**1919** – The cap on funding on 1d in the £ was removed. This reached 7.8d in the £ by 1963.

**1939** – Plans for a new Central Library building are shelved due to concerns over the future with the expected war on the horizon.

**1966** – City Engineers determined that the building was not strong enough to carry the weight of all the books. It took 5 years for supporting stacks to be built before all the books were re-shelved.



## Opening times

Monday – 9.00am – 8.00pm

Tuesday – 9.00am – 8.00pm

Weds – 9.00am – 8.00pm

Thursday 9.00am – 8.00pm

Friday – 9.00 – 5.00pm

Saturday – 10.00am – 4.00pm

Sunday - Closed

For more information

Local and Family History

Leeds Central Library, Calverley Street,  
Leeds, LS1 3AB

T: 0113 378 6982

E: [localandfamilyhistory@leeds.gov.uk](mailto:localandfamilyhistory@leeds.gov.uk)

W: [www.leeds.gov.uk/libraries](http://www.leeds.gov.uk/libraries)

Blog: [secretlibraryleeds.net](http://secretlibraryleeds.net)

Tickets:

[ticketsource.co.uk/Leedslibraryevents](http://ticketsource.co.uk/Leedslibraryevents)

## Leeds City Council Papers: Libraries

Our Research Guides list some of the most useful, interesting and unique items in at Leeds Central Library. Many others are listed in our online and card catalogues. Items marked \* may require 24-hours notice to view.

Contact us for more information:

Visit: [www.leeds.gov.uk/localandfamilyhistory](http://www.leeds.gov.uk/localandfamilyhistory)

Email: [localandfamilyhistory@leeds.gov.uk](mailto:localandfamilyhistory@leeds.gov.uk)

Tel. (0113) 378 6982



    @LeedsLibraries



## Background

Leeds Corporation (now Leeds City Council) has been deeply involved in the development of the fast-growing city in the 19th century and onwards. Over 200 years of Council papers are lodged in the Central Library, and these give details of how it has contributed to making the city what it is today. Many of these papers are annual publications, while others are for specific activities.

## How it started

The Public Libraries Act of 1850 gave councils the powers to run a library, but it took 18 more years for Leeds Corporation to pass a motion to set one up. Earlier objections had been around wanting to avoid adding costs to ratepayers. But they were eventually persuaded by the benefits, particularly for the betterment of the working classes who could spend more time learning and less time drinking. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, statistics were collected on the class and occupation of borrowers to ensure that betterment was being achieved. And in 1909, the Annual Report stated the statistics were important for "showing the number and character of the books used, (and) the social status of those who use them".



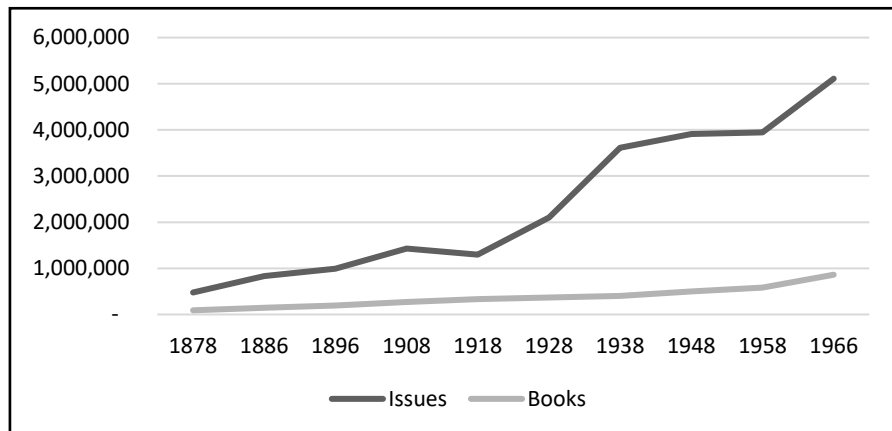
Crossgates Library



The Gramophone Library

## Numbers of books borrowed

By 1902 there were 1m issues (borrowings) recorded and this reached 5.5m issues by 1970. Numbers have been falling since, and the current issues are less than 2m per year.



## Role of the Library

Since 1950, the role of the library has changed for a number of reasons, including the introduction of new media (eg. gramophone records) and computerisation. The falling price of books has meant that there are less books borrowed today, but Leeds Libraries continue to be a valuable community asset.

Today's Library is also focussed on culture health and information, including finding ways of creating better access to the significant heritage collections. And the next generation of readers are already enjoying the libraries, with Story and Rhyme sessions at the many local libraries.

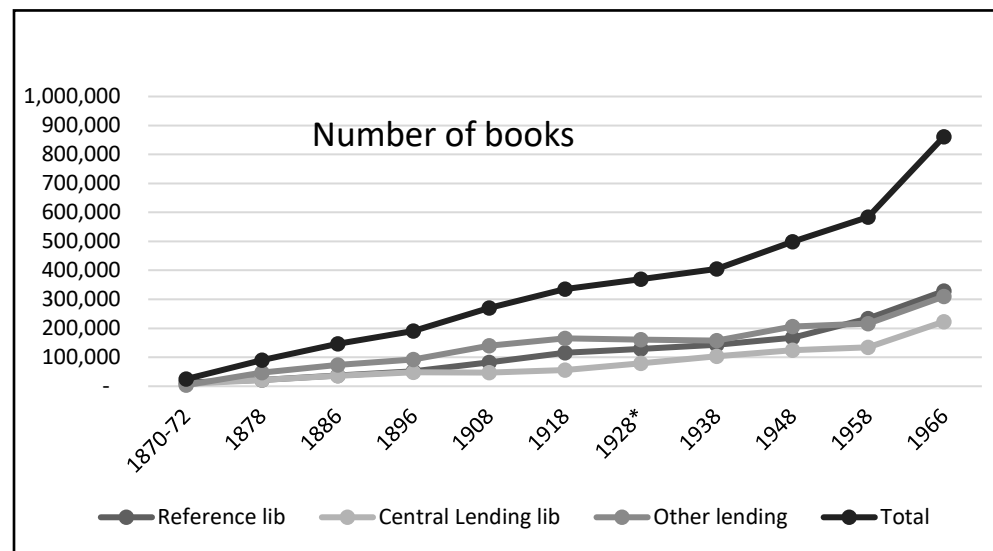
## Central & Local Services

The Corporation took over the New Wortley & Mechanics Institute libraries in 1870, which started the local library service. Meanwhile, the Central Library after being initially housed in the Infirmary, moved into its current premises in 1884. There are currently 37 Libraries across Leeds.

Crossgates Library was built in 1939 and was awarded a bronze medal for best building by the Yorkshire Society of Architects. Sadly, the building fell into disrepair and was sold by the Council in February 2024.

## Number of Books held by the Library

At first the libraries were funded by adding a Penny in the Pound to the Rates (We have Council Tax instead of Rates today). This severely limited the number of books that could be purchased along with the associated costs of running the libraries. It wasn't until the Public Libraries Act of 1919 that this limit was removed.





## Bye-Laws

In 1904 there were 10 regulations, and this had risen to 60 by 1961. Early regulations included "A person shall not while in an offensively unclean condition either in person or in dress use the Library" and 'No-Spitting'. In 1957 strict rules around the care of gramophone records for borrowing were included, e.g. "the automatic record-changing apparatus will not be used for LPs."

## Staffing Issues

The 1899 Annual Report identified a particular staffing issue: "The difficulties which have been experienced in obtaining suitable male assistants to fill the vacancies in the staff have induced the Committee to try the experiment of throwing the employment open to persons of both sexes. Female assistants are now engaged, and they have been found suited to the employment."

After the Second World War, shortages of staff became a major issue for the libraries. Turnover of staff was routinely a third every year, which led to many issues around training and recruitment. The difficulty of recruiting clerks to undertake routine duties alongside awkward hours, led to the Council looking at how computerisation could help address some of these issues as early as 1970.

While the picture on the next page shows the happy and carefree life of a librarian, it wasn't always so. In 1962, anti-social behaviour in the Meanwood Estate library led to the librarian, Margaret Doran, being provided with a bodyguard whilst at work.

## 1931 Staff Manual

Working conditions in the 1930s were in many ways very different from today. Sick pay was 50% of full pay for those with less than 5 years' service; work diaries were kept by all librarians and signed off by the Departmental head each week; audible conversations were not permitted in the public library. Some things are more familiar though, and staff were required to sanitise their hands twice a day for health purposes – back then to prevent the spread of Scarlet Fever and Tuberculosis.



## 20th Century

The types of books borrowed changed to reflect the national and global issues of the time. Before WW1, books borrowed reflected the social change of the age, and the theme of self-improvement. After WW1 this moved towards self-occupation, reflected in the themes of unemployment and leisure. After WW2, the move more towards self-consciousness emerged with themes about social services, the changing roles for women etc.