

21 Reasons Why Worthing Should Have a Public Library: An 1892 Campaign for Our Times

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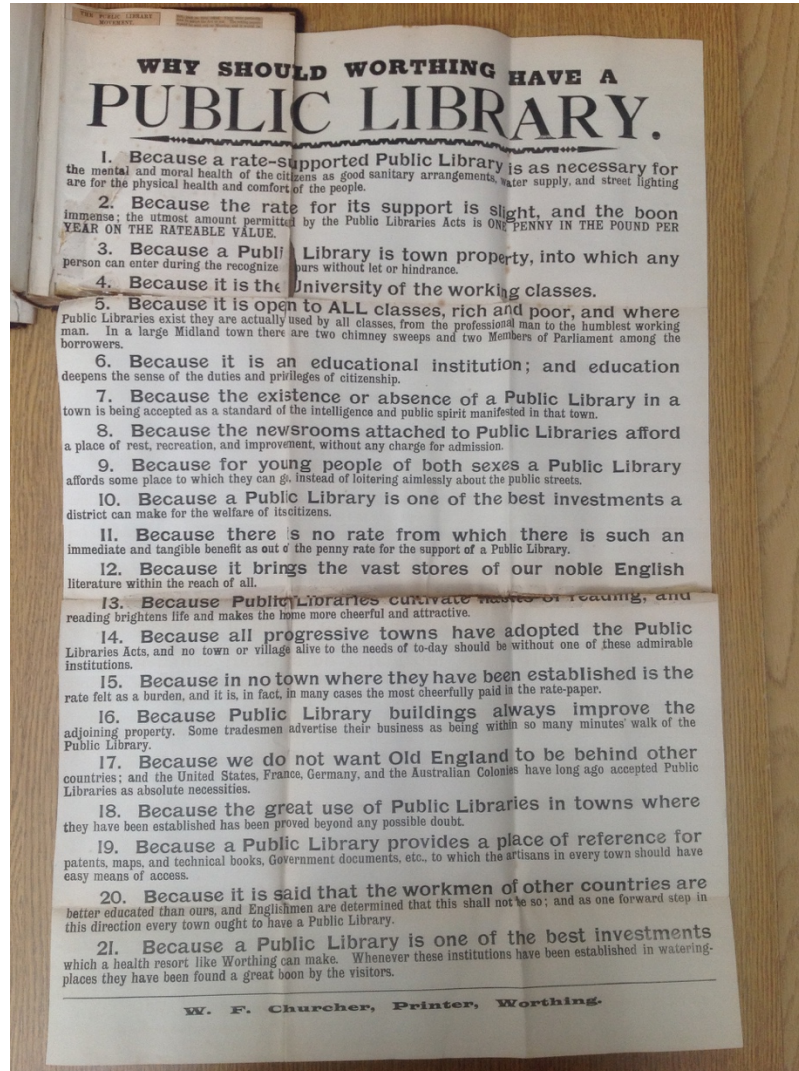


Image caption: "Why Should Worthing Have a Public Library". Poster. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library by Robert W. Charles, February 1892. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery reference: 69/416. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery location: AN/37/H – Box 1. Social Life. Worthing Related. Scrapbooks, Newspaper Cuttings.

In the last decade, public library closures have become a regular and regrettable occurrence. Government austerity policies have radically reduced local councils' budgets, forcing tough decisions with limited finances. Libraries are characterised as luxuries when culture is made to compete for cash with other public services. What libraries are for, and who they benefit, has been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent times, and contemporary campaigns to keep libraries in operation have been vociferous and creative, employing a range of tools of protest and persuasion from poetry to posters.

In 1892, in Worthing, West Sussex, a library campaign played out on the streets through similarly creative means. In the first instance, large-scale notices appeared on hoardings all over the town. Two and a half feet high, these text-heavy bill posters used the visual style of election materials to respond to the provocation, “Why Should Worthing Have a Public Library”. Produced in a bright modern typeface by W. F. Churcher, a town councillor and the editor of the *Worthing Gazette*, as part of an ambitious campaign spearheaded by a young solicitor, Robert W. Charles, the poster sought to harness the growing energy of the so-called ‘public library movement’ for the benefit of the town. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 had established the conditions for local boroughs to seek approval for the provision of what were first described as ‘free’ libraries (they were financed through local rates, initially set at a limit of a penny in the pound). What was latterly described as ‘public’ library provision – public in the sense of the public sphere, and in the democratic sense of being of, by and for the general populace – had grown slowly but steadily throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century. By 1886, a total of 125 libraries had been established in England,¹ but Worthing in 1892 was still without such an institution. Charles, a newcomer to the town, was determined to remedy the situation.

The posters outlined, in declamatory style, twenty-one reasons why a public library was desirable and, indeed, essential for the town. For those in doubt as to its value, it was stated to be “as necessary for the mental and moral health of the citizens as good sanitary arrangements, water supply and street lighting are for the physical health and comfort of the people”. A library provided not only “a place of rest, recreation, and improvement” but also a place where artisans could be educated in their trade, through access to reference materials. It was, the poster declared, “the University of the working classes”. Nonetheless, it was also emphasised that it was “open to ALL classes, rich and poor”. Other nations were steaming ahead with public library provision and leaving “Old England” behind. Even within national boundaries, such an institution should be understood as an index of regional superiority: “the existence or absence of a Public Library in a town is being accepted as a standard of the intelligence and public spirit manifested in that town”. It was therefore argued that “a health resort like Worthing” should provide such an institution for its inhabitants as well as its growing visitor population.²

From the perspective of an avid twenty-first century library user, these are all good points, well made. But, as library historians have pointed out, there was, perhaps surprisingly, no particularly passionate public sentiment for their establishment during the nineteenth century.³ Alistair Black observes, “we can speak of a public library movement, but only just.”⁴ Small groups of enthusiasts mounted local campaigns around the country, but progress was slow, and turnout to decision-making polls could also be disappointing. Most surprisingly, some of the loudest voices were those who opposed library provision. In Worthing, at the time of Charles’s campaign, handbills circulated listing an alternative set of reasons why a public library was *not* wanted. In an echo of twenty-first

¹ Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850-1914* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1996) 21.

² “Why Should Worthing Have a Public Library”. Poster. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library by Robert W. Charles, February 1892. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery reference: 69/416. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery location: AN/37/H – Box 1. Social Life. Worthing Related. Scrapbooks, Newspaper Cuttings.

³ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957) 236.

⁴ Black, *A New History of the English Public Library*, 20.

century political reasoning, these noted that a library was a luxury, and the town could not support the expense.⁵ In a particularly energetic anti-library campaign, Reverend J. Lancaster, the vicar of the Church of the Holy Trinity, financed a set of leaflets and to be delivered to the doors of the poor throughout the town. For Lancaster, money was a core issue. The rate-financed library, he claimed, “will press heavily upon *ladies and gentlemen with very limited means*, of which there are many in Worthing” [emphasis in original]; indeed, it was argued that the institution “will be used very largely by a class who are in a position to provide their own reading.” Another purported issue was the moral wellbeing of the town: a public library, the vicar warned gravely, “will be conducive to novel reading rather than healthy reading.”⁶

Claims and counterclaims played out through bill posters and leaflets distributed around Worthing, but also in letters to the local press, and in the public meeting organised to promote a public vote on the matter. On 30 November 1892, the platform party at the Worthing debate was an all-male affair made up of current and former mayors, councillors and members of the clergy. The local newspaper reported, however, that the “large audience” (the event was standing room only) was “of a thoroughly representative character, including as it did ministers of religion, members of the Town Council, representatives of the professional and trading classes, artisans, and ladies.”⁷ The main case for the library was put by Thomas Greenwood, a former librarian and the author of widely-read works in favour of museums and libraries. Greenwood’s speech, according to one account, was “luminous, forcible, and convincing”.⁸ Indeed, Greenwood was a professional campaigner for the cause. His *Public Libraries: A History of the Movement and a Manual for the Organisation and Management of Rate-Supported Libraries* ran through multiple editions in the 1880s and 1890s, and at 600 pages it functioned as an advocate’s guide and a comprehensive campaigning tool. The Worthing ‘21 Reasons’ poster was adapted from a model offered in its appendices, and the book also provided lists of inspiring quotes, a step-by-step guide to establishing a local vote, and even a rousing poem to be recited at a library’s opening.⁹

The arguments rehearsed (and dismissed) in the public meeting and in the press clustered around several concerns. The issue of money was shown to be weak; as one defendant put it, “The rate is limited by an Act of Parliament to a penny in the pound: to the average cottager this would mean a payment of less than a shilling a year for an ample supply of wholesome literature for himself and his family.”¹⁰ With reference to the specific financial objection of Reverend Lancaster - described as “an opponent of intellectual culture”¹¹ - critics observed that it “comes with very bad grace from those

⁵ “Some reasons why you ought to vote ‘NO’ to the proposal for a Free Public Library”. Handbill. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

⁶ “Why should Worthing have a Public Library?” Handbill by J. Lancaster, Vicar of the Church of the Holy Trinity, Worthing, 6 December 1892. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

⁷ “The Public Library Movement”. Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

⁸ “Worthing and the Public Library Movement”. *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 3 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

⁹ Thomas Greenwood, *Public Libraries: A History of the Movement and a Manual for the Organisation and Management of Rate-Supported Libraries* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Ltd, 1890, third edition).

¹⁰ “The Public Library Movement”. Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹¹ *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 17 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

who are ever mindful themselves of the importance of 'the collection'."¹² Aside from money, concerns about class coloured much of the discussion. Some were alarmed by a recent claim in *The Lancet*, that "there was a danger of infectious diseases being spread by books going from the library into different homes". Greenwood publicly dismissed this as spurious, and reassured those assembled in Worthing that should such an occurrence take place, "books might be either disinfected or destroyed and replaced".¹³ It is notable, however, that Greenwood's own publications included an illustration of a disinfecting device: a tin bookcase with a closing front.¹⁴ Such commercial innovations show the scale of the concern about working class germs.

A connected concern related to idleness and utility. "Loafers" were the bogeymen of the library campaign; these spectres, signalling unemployed men, apparently loitered aimlessly in public spaces and the library could be seen to encourage them by providing entertainment and shelter. In Worthing's case, local solicitor Melvill Green argued that it was better that a loafer "should loaf in the library amongst books, than at the street corner".¹⁵ Greenwood, however, included examples in his books that showed that not all were of the same opinion. He quoted a correspondent on the subject of a man in Brighton "who could not be got to work. He was usually to be found at the Public Library, perusing light literature, and he asserts that the library ruined him. I mentioned this to a gentleman at the library (a visitor), and he said he had long seen it, and that no greater curse existed than these libraries, and he had rather see a young man hanging about a public-house than spending his time in these places."¹⁶ Greenwood himself was rather more generous in his assessment; he stated, "We have too many institutions of the strictly 'improving' class, which inculcate a sort of priggish propriety, and leave no room for the healthy development of the universal desire for entertainment." Nonetheless, he permitted, "No mercy should be shown to the sleepers." Those seen to be using library spaces for anything other than the express purpose of reading – even for the writing of letters – would be ejected by a specially appointed "superintendent ... usually in a distinctive coat".¹⁷

The strongest voices against libraries were those opposed to reading for pleasure. In particular, fiction was singled out for condemnation. As one dissenter put it, "some of our Free Public Libraries" are "three-parts filled... with the rankest overgrowth of latter-day literature, with ephemeral fiction, and the still more perishable wares of the modern humourist."¹⁸ Such institutions, another complained, "may furnish numbers of people – especially idle young women – with pastime for spare afternoons"¹⁹ but they would never educate and elevate, as they ideally should. Popular works of the imagination were seen as debasing by many, and public libraries could spread this ill: "Many

¹² *The Worthing Intelligencer. West Worthing Journal and General Advertiser*. 10 December 1892, n. p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹³ "Worthing and the Public Library Movement". *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 3 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹⁴ Greenwood, *Public Libraries*, 1892, 495.

¹⁵ "The Public Library Movement". Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹⁶ Thomas Greenwood, *Public Libraries: A History of the Movement and a Manual for the Organisation and Management of Rate-Supported Libraries* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Ltd, 1894, fourth edition) 82.

¹⁷ Greenwood, *Public Libraries*, 1892, 31.

¹⁸ *The Standard*. 15 September 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹⁹ *The Standard*. 15 September 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

are the crimes brought about by the disordered imagination of a reader of sensational, and often immoral, rubbish, while many a home is neglected and uncared for owing to the all-absorbed novel-reading wife.”²⁰ Greenwood tackled these claims in Worthing. At the public hearing he noted that “the percentage of fiction in public libraries ranged from 65 to 75”, and added that “drama and poetry, from Shakespeare to Tennyson” fell under this heading. Fiction, in his estimation, was something of a gateway drug leading to the consumption of more “solid” works of literature. He claimed, “In nearly all the large public libraries the demand for novels was decreasing, while there was an increasing desire for books of science, history, and travel.” Finally, he noted that a “great deal of discrimination was exercised” in the selection of books for public libraries; “such trash as ‘The Mystery of a Hansom Cab’ and ‘How I lost £250,000 in two years’ found no place there.”²¹ Ultimately, he conceded, “there was a demand for fiction, and the people who paid the piper had a right to call for the tune.”²²

With objections thus raised and put to rest, the resolution, “That in the opinion of this meeting it is desirable that the Public Libraries Act should be adopted in Worthing” was carried unanimously, “amid acclamation”.²³ Shortly after, rate-payers were balloted. Votes for totalled 1207; votes against numbered 468, making a majority of 739. Interestingly, some Worthingites added detail to their papers; these comments largely came from those who wanted other needs addressed first. Some women endorsed the library on behalf of their partners, but as their names were not on the voting registers, these papers were dismissed as spoiled.²⁴

The Worthing library campaign of 1892 was a success in that it confirmed the value of such an institution for a town that wanted to establish itself as progressive. Only one other town in the county (Hove) had adopted the Public Libraries Act; and the vote thus saw Worthing, in its own estimation, move “to the front at last”.²⁵ In 1893, however, a devastating outbreak of typhoid in the town saw priorities necessarily directed elsewhere, and it was 1895 before a first and very modest public library was established in Worthing, with Charles as its honorary librarian. It took until 1908 – any many further campaigns by the redoubtable librarian and curator Marian Frost – before a dedicated building was constructed, in the form of what is now Worthing Museum and Art Gallery.²⁶ Such libraries, once established, were used by all classes and both genders, and their users happily got the reading matter they desired and deserved.

Robert Charles meticulously detailed the contours of the 1892 campaign for a public library in Worthing through his cuttings book, pasting in local and national newspaper reports, lyrics for

²⁰ Greenwood, *Public Libraries*, 1894, 82.

²¹ “Worthing and the Public Library Movement”. *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 3 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

²² “The Public Library Movement”. Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

²³ “Worthing and the Public Library Movement”. *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 3 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

²⁴ “A Public Library for Worthing: The Poll this Day”. Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

²⁵ “Worthing and the Public Library Movement”. *Sussex Coast Mercury*, 3 December 1892, n.p. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

²⁶ Paul R. Harrington, *Worthing Public Library: A History*. 1969. Unpublished manuscript. Local Studies Library, Worthing. Jenni Marchant, *A History of Worthing Public Library*. Unpublished manuscript, Local Studies Library, Worthing. n.d. [c. 1968].

campaign songs, copies of handbills and a folded copy of the poster; these are now part of Worthing Museum's local history collection. Like Greenwood, he gathered these materials together in the optimistic hope that they would benefit "the historian of the movement, writing a hundred years hence, when the entire country will be honeycombed with Public Libraries".²⁷ I am that historian, but more than a century later I look to these materials not as laurels to rest upon but as sourcebooks for renewed twenty-first century campaigns. The value of public libraries for all classes, for entertainment and edification, is still not secure.

²⁷ Greenwood, *Public Libraries*, 1892, xii.