

IV^e SECTION.

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BRANCH LIBRARIES

by Charles W. SUTTON,
Manchester.

The following communication has been prepared in response to a request that I should contribute a report on the organisation of popular libraries in the same town, parish, or county in Great Britain, and on the federation of these libraries, especially as regards the advantages or disadvantages of organising in a large town (1) A central library having a branch in each district and fed from the central : (2) A complete and independent library in each district of the town.

The word « popular » is obviously restricted to those libraries that are maintained by town councils or other local authorities.

With regard to *counties*, the legislature has not, so far, given power to County Councils to administer the Libraries Acts, and it must be confessed that the rate paying inhabitants of rural districts have shown but little desire for the possession of that power. In the counties of Cambridge and Westmorland the Education Committees have, however, established central libraries from which small collections of books, chiefly on agricultural subjects, are lent out to village schools. In Westmorland the scheme is worked through the Kendal Public Library. Through the liberality of Sir Charles Seely a library has been established in the Isle of Wight. This is administered by the County Council, apparently without any expense to the public, and books are lent to any resident in the island, either through the central library or

by means of thirty branches. Particulars of these schemes, as well as of others of a voluntary character, are supplied in a paper on « Libraries in Rural Districts » contributed by Mr. Harry Farr to the Library Assistants' Association in 1909.

From the statistics which I have collected, I find that twenty nine municipalities and Urban District Councils in and near London possess more than one library in their respective areas, and that elsewhere throughout the country the libraries of forty-seven corporations have branch libraries.

Many of these branches are complete libraries, with their own permanent stocks of books and their own catalogues, their special registers of borrowers and all other apparatus for efficient working ; affording, in fact, the same advantages as the central libraries, except, perhaps, in the extent of stock. In other cases a « branch » signifies small evening branches open in school rooms, subsidiary reading rooms, and even simple distributing stations.

Most of the Metropolitan libraries were established before the creation of the present boroughs, and at the time when the governing authorities were the parish vestries. In the cases of West Ham, Wandsworth, Camberwell, and Willesden, the libraries founded by the vestries have continued their separate existence, each being independent of the other, and managed by Special Sub-Committees and special librarians. In other London municipalities the various libraries have been brought under the central control of a general committee and a « Chief » Librarian. Two libraries are supported jointly by neighbouring boroughs. They are situated on the borders of Lambeth and Croydon and Lambeth and Camberwell, and each is managed by a Sub-Committee appointed by two library Committees in proportion to the amount contributed by each borough. The librarian in each case is under the sole control of his own Sub-Committee.

In the first group, that of « independent » libraries, we have :

1. West Ham, with libraries at West Ham (40,000 vols.), Ganning Town (22,600 vols.), Custom House (8,000 vols.), and Plaistow (9,000 vols.)

2. Wandsworth, with libraries at Wandsworth, Clapham, Putney, Streatham and Tooting (with Balham). Wandsworth has two branches of its own at Allfarthing Lane (5,600 vols.) and Garratt Lane (2,500 vols.). Streatham (21,000 vols.) has two sub-libraries at Balham (12,000 vols.) and Tooting (9,000 vols.)

3. Camberwell, with libraries at Camberwell (19,500 vols.) Dulwich (13,800 vols.), Livesey (11,000 vols.), Nunhead (8,400 vols.) and North Camberwell (7,000 vols.). The librarians of the five libraries meet together from time to time to arrange matters that affect all the libraries, and to prevent diversity of methods. If the main committee are desirous of information or advice on any subject that comes before them, it is referred to the librarians, who meet and discuss it, and make a recommendation, which the Committee in most cases adopts. At the beginning of the financial year the Borough Treasurer calls the librarians together for the purpose of disposing of the penny rate, allocating to each library an amount of money according to its size, importance and needs. The system is reported to work satisfactorily, no doubt because the librarians here work harmoniously.

4. Willesden: libraries at Willesden Green (16,000 vols), Kensal Rise (9,000 vols.), Harlesden (13,500 vols.), Kilburn (13,500). Each library is independent and managed by a separate Committee, but Willesden Green and Kensal Rise Libraries are under the control of the same librarian.

The boroughs in the London area possessing branches or district libraries controlled from a centre by a Chief Librarian are about twenty-five in number, the number of libraries in each borough varying from two to six.

There is naturally a general uniformity in the management of these branch libraries, though the rule is pleasantly broken by certain divergencies in details. In each borough the Library Committee sanctions the policy to be followed throughout the borough, and the Chief Librarian, either himself or through a senior assistant, makes a regular inspection of the branches. At Croydon the branch librarians report in person as well as in writing every week at the head libra-

ry. Book selection and purchasing are directed at the central library, though in most cases the books are delivered, catalogued, and prepared for circulation at the branches. At Hammersmith and Hampstead, however, new books are received first at the central, where they are checked, collated and catalogued.

The registration of borrowers is effected at the central libraries in Islington and Fulham and probably in one or two other boroughs, but the tickets are issued from the branches. In the majority of cases the tickets are registered as well as issued from each library.

The practice is common throughout the London boroughs and districts of allowing borrowers to use their tickets at will at any library within the borough. There is a difference at Southwark, where borrowers must have a separate ticket for each library they may wish to use. Generally the books must be returned where they are borrowed, but at Croydon and Hampstead much more liberty is allowed, and borrowers may return their books at any library and obtain new books in exchange. Moreover books are brought to one library from another to suit the convenience of readers. At Croydon each library is provided with a complete card catalogue of the combined stocks of all the libraries. Even where a regular exchange system is not in operation the librarian will in most cases comply with the wish of a borrower to obtain any special book from another branch. In practice, however, this is seldom required.

Outside London the only libraries possessing fully organised systems of inter-branch working are Glasgow and Wallesey, where, as at Croydon and Hampstead, books may be borrowed and returned at any library, as may suit the convenience of borrowers, and where books are regularly brought from one library to another. It should be explained that expensive or special books are not duplicated throughout the Glasgow branch libraries, but that while each branch may have a fair collection of books on geology, botany, the French Revolution, India, or other large subject, the individual books will differ from those in another branch

library. Thus the whole of the libraries are regarded as one great collection, and facilities accordingly given for its use as freely as possible. This idea of all the libraries forming a group working in union and supplementing each other, is kept in view at Woolwich and Stepney and other places.

In only a limited number of provincial cities and towns are branches so fully equipped for their work as those in the majority of London boroughs, where the population is concentrated and the income sufficient. The branch libraries are quite as good in Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool and other wealthy centres; but in many less favoured towns, Branches which have been set up in response to persistent calls must remain small and starved until a more liberal supply of funds is assured. In too many cases, branches have been established without due consideration. In one town where they have been forced upon the library committee by Ward representatives, the librarian is of opinion that the branches circulate a greater proportion of fiction than they ought to do, and seriously reduce the amount of work of permanent value which might be done at the central. If the Committee had not been compelled to increase their administrative expenses by opening branches, the central would have had treble its present stock of books and the educational work would have been increased tenfold.

Delivery stations and evening branches are worked in a number of towns, but it is doubtful whether their usefulness is always commensurate with the expense they entail. In many cases, however, their existence may be justified, as they bring the influences of the library into regions where a large expenditure from general funds would not be warranted.

Outside London, throughout the country, branch libraries have in every, every case grown out of a parent stem and have invariably been administered from a central point. No other system is conceivable, except in Dublin, where the four public libraries are independent of each other, having no central institution, and are unfortunately in a state of arrested growth through want of nourishment.

The use of borrowers' tickets is restricted to one branch

library at Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Nottingham, Oldham and Plymouth. At Birmingham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Bolton borrowers may have tickets at as many branches as they like, upon supplying a separate guarantee in each case. Elsewhere the same ticket may be used at any branch at will.

In most towns the more costly books intended for lending are concentrated at the central library, which thus forms a store from which the special literary needs of the people can be satisfied. At Liverpool the problem has been met by the establishment of a depot at the central library, being a collection of special or technical books which by reason of their cost and limited interest are not supplied to all the branches. The depot is connected by telephone with each branch and books are forwarded on demand for circulation from any branch.

It seems unnecessary to go into the details of the organisation of branch libraries, or to state what is or should be done at the head office and what at the branches. These matters can be seen admirably set forth in Dr Bostwick's book on « The American Public Library » and in Mr James Duff Brown's « Manual of Library Economy ».

The question of centralisation or independence does not arise except with regard to the few London boroughs, where, prior of the formation of the boroughs, different parishes had their own libraries with efficient librarians. To have united these libraries would probably have aroused jealousies in the local governing bodies, and it would have been necessary to supersede some of the librarians. On the whole it was deemed better to let things go on as they were, and it is probable that the arrangements was a good one under the circumstances.

