



# **Kensal Rise Library, 1900 – 2000**

by

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Kensal Rise Library, c. 1930

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## **KENSAL RISE LIBRARY, 1900 –2000**

Although the centenary of Kensal Rise Library is being celebrated today, its "prehistory" goes back to the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. As a permanent memorial of the English victory, All Souls College was founded in Oxford by Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury. The College was endowed with much of the land in Kensal Rise, then of course entirely rural, and a source of income from rents. With the expansion of London, the land was progressively sold for housing development from the eighteen eighties, and local street names include All Souls Avenue, College Road and the names of several fellows of the College such as Buchanan, Clifford and Holland.

In response to local requests, All Souls College donated a site for a reading room at the corner of College Road and Bathurst Gardens, originally to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, in 1896, but in the event only opened three months before her death. The architects were Done, Hunter & Co. of Cricklewood, and the building contract was let to an Exeter firm. The opening took place on Thursday September 27 1900 (being half day closing locally), and this part of the building is where the Reference and Adult Fiction stock is housed today. The original entrance, of which no trace remains, was in the wall parallel to and farthest from College Road.

The opening ceremony was performed by the celebrated American author, Mark Twain, who had rented Dollis Hill House for the Summer from the Earl of Aberdeen. The following month he returned to America, which he had left in 1891 to evade his creditors. Mark Twain was presented with an inscribed silver key for his services, and in return gave the Chairman of the Library Committee, Charles Pinkham (of Purves Road), a signed photograph of himself and five of his own books.

The first member of staff was H.H.Hubbard, an ex-serviceman wounded in the Boer War. His title was "Attendant" and he reported to the Librarian at Willesden Green. Some 80 people per day used the Reading Room in its first week, and this figure rose to 150 after six months. The Committee clearly hankered after a proper lending library for Kensal Rise, and by Spring 1901 some books had been donated and funds were being sought to buy others, though these could only be shelved in the lobby and by encroaching upon Hubbard's office. An appeal was made to the Scots-American steel magnate and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, for funds with which to enlarge the building, and he responded with a grant of £3,000 in September 1903.

The design of the extension was again entrusted to Done, Hunter and Co., whose A.H. Murray Rust designed all that part of the library between the front door and College Road. He enlarged the original red brick building with Tudor stone mullions and a slate roof, adding a Baroque shaped gable above the bay window on the College Road elevation, and a curved pediment over the door, supported on Ionic pillars. This extension was officially opened by Judge Rentoul in May 1904. A photograph taken the following year shows that the pillar box had not yet been installed outside the library despite it bearing the royal cipher of Queen Victoria. (Letters would have been posted at the building on the opposite corner of College Road and Bathurst Gardens, which was the original sub-post office for the area.)

Like almost all public libraries before the First World War, Kensal Rise had a "closed access" system. Readers chose their books from a printed catalogue, then requested them at the counter, whereupon they would be fetched from the shelves by a member of staff. In 1922, it became the first library in the Borough of Willesden to allow the public to choose their books from the shelves. From this time, a Branch Librarian was appointed, the first three incumbents afterwards becoming the Chief Librarians of Eastbourne, Luton and Deptford. The Reading Room was enlarged in

February 1928, with an extension between the original building and the first house in Bathurst Gardens. A Children's Library was established in an upstairs room in 1934, and this was decorated with murals depicting scenes from children's classics. They were painted by two students of Willesden School of Art, Dudley Holland ("The Three Musketeers" and "Alice Through the Looking Glass") and Maurice de Sausmarez ("Treasure Island"). Though no longer in position, they are still extant in the building. Another upstairs room was designated as a Study Room for children.

The Second World War saw the iron railings removed from the perimeter wall, and the building suffered minor bomb damage in 1940. Firewatchers spent nights in the attic, which has a view across London to St. Paul's Cathedral. In April 1965, responsibility for the library passed from the Borough of Willesden to the newly-formed London Borough of Brent. The previous Autumn, major structural changes had taken place. The Reading Room was closed, such institutions having lost popularity in the television era, and the Children's Library moved into the 1928 extension. At the same time, the stone public staircase was removed, the open courtyard filled in and the mosaic floor in the entrance lobby replaced with terrazzo. The perimeter wall was reduced in height, and the privet hedge behind it, planted shortly before the First World War, removed. The vacated rooms upstairs were used for many years by Brent's School Library Service, and the ground floor layout is that which survives today, apart from the replacement of the card catalogue by a counter reflecting the computer era.

As it is comparatively close to Willesden Green and Kilburn Libraries, and much of the potential catchment area is taken up by Kensal Green Cemetery, this library has more than once been threatened with closure. Appreciative local residents have defended it doughtily, fortified by a covenant placed on the land by All Souls College, restricting its use as a condition of the gift. In 1994, the interior was sympathetically refurbished in a "Neo-Edwardian" style with green decor and brass electroliers. When new, the building would have been gas lit, and heated by open coal fires, with open access to the shelves far in the future, but the result has been a smart attractive library with a "period" atmosphere.

Robert Barker 9/2000.