

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).