
Twenty-one reasons why Worthing should have a public library: an 1892 campaign for our times

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In the last decade, public library closures have become a regular, regrettable occurrence. 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 under intense scrutiny in recent times, and contemporary campaigns to keep libraries open have been vociferous and creative, employing tools of protest and persuasion from poetry to posters.

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In 1892, in Worthing, West Sussex, a library campaign played out on the streets through similar means. Large-scale notices appeared on hoardings all over the town. Two and a half feet high, these bill posters used the visual style of election materials to ask, 'Why should Worthing have a public library'. Produced in a bright type 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 posters sought to harness the energy of the so-called 'public library movement' for the benefit of the town. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 had enabled local boroughs to seek approval for their provision, financed through local rates at a penny in the pound. By 1886, a total of 125 public libraries had been established in England, but Worthing in 1892 was still without one! Charles was determined to remedy the situation.

The posters outlined, in declamatory style, twenty-one reasons why a public library was essential. 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'. It provided not only 'a place of rest, recreation, and improvement' but also a place where artisans could be educated. It was, the poster declared, 'the University of the working classes'; nonetheless, it was 'open to ALL... rich and poor'. Such institutions were an index of cultural 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'; 'a health resort like Worthing' should thus provide one for its inhabitants as well as its growing visitor population.²

From the perspective of an avid twenty-first century library user, these are good points, well made. But, as library historians have pointed out, there was, perhaps surprisingly, no 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 Enthusiasts mounted local campaigns, but progress was slow, and turnout to decision-making polls could 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 century political reasoning, these noted that a library was a luxury, and the town could not support the expense.⁵ Reverend J. Lancaster, vicar of the Church of the Holy Trinity, financed leaflets to be delivered to the doors of the poor.

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.

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.

The rate-financed library, he claimed, “will press heavily upon ladies and gentlemen with very limited means, of which there are many in Worthing”. 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 issue was moral: 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, and in the public meeting organised to promote a public vote on the matter. The main case was put by Thomas Greenwood, the author of widely-read works in favour of museums and libraries, who 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 was a comprehensive campaigning tool. The Worthing ‘21 reasons’ poster was adapted from a model in its appendices.

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’.⁸ Rate-payers were balloted: votes for totalled 1207; votes against numbered 468, making a majority of 739.⁹ The Worthing library campaign of 1892 was a success. In 1893, however, a devastating outbreak of typhoid in the town saw priorities necessarily directed elsewhere, and it was 1895 before the first and very modest public library was established in Worthing, with Charles as its honorary librarian. It took until 1908 before a dedicated building was constructed, in the form of what is now Worthing

Museum and Art Gallery.¹⁰ Public libraries, once established, were indeed used by all, and their users happily got the reading matter they desired and deserved.

Robert Charles meticulously detailed the 1892 campaign through a cuttings book, pasting in newspaper reports, lyrics for campaign songs, copies of handbills and the poster; these are now part of Worthing Museum’s collection. Like Greenwood, he gathered the 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’.¹¹ I am that historian, but over 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, for entertainment and edification, is still not secure.

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The poster has been folded into a scrapbook for over 100 years and has sadly torn along several folds. With thanks to graphic designer Peter Gates for his scanning and repair work to produce this reproduction.

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RIGHT

Bill 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. Size 76.5cm x 49cm

⁷ 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).

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

⁹ A Public Library for Worthing: The Poll this Day”. Unknown source, n.d. Newspaper cutting. Cuttings Book on Formation of Library.

¹⁰ Paul R. Harrington, *Worthing Public Library: A History*. 1969. Unpublished manuscript. Local Studies Library, Worthing

¹¹ Jenni Marchant, *A History of Worthing Public Library*. Unpublished manuscript, Local Studies Library, Worthing. n.d. [c. 1968].

¹² Greenwood, *Public Libraries*, 1892, xii.

WHY SHOULD WORTHING HAVE A PUBLIC LIBRARY.

1. Because a rate-supported Public Library is 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.
2. Because the rate for its support is slight, and the boon immense; the utmost amount permitted by the Public Libraries Acts is ONE PENNY IN THE POUND PER YEAR ON THE RATEABLE VALUE.
3. Because a Public Library is town property, into which any person can enter during the recognized hours without let or hindrance.
4. Because it is the University of the working classes.
5. Because it is open to ALL classes, rich and poor, and where Public Libraries exist they are actually used by all classes, from the professional man to the humblest working man. In a large Midland town there are two chimney sweeps and two Members of Parliament among the borrowers.
6. Because it is an educational institution; and education deepens the sense of the duties and privileges of citizenship.
7. Because 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.
8. Because the newsrooms attached to Public Libraries afford a place of rest, recreation, and improvement, without any charge for admission.
9. Because for young people of both sexes a Public Library affords some place to which they can go, instead of loitering aimlessly about the public streets.
10. Because a Public Library is one of the best investments a district can make for the welfare of its citizens.
11. Because there is no rate from which there is such an immediate and tangible benefit as out of the penny rate for the support of a Public Library.
12. Because it brings the vast stores of our noble English literature within the reach of all.
13. Because Public Libraries cultivate habits of reading and reading brightens life and makes the home more cheerful and attractive.
14. Because all progressive towns have adopted the Public Libraries Acts, and no town or village alive to the needs of to-day should be without one of these admirable institutions.
15. Because in no town where they have been established is the rate felt as a burden, and it is, in fact, in many cases the most cheerfully paid in the rate-paper.
16. Because Public Library buildings always improve the adjoining property. Some tradesmen advertise their business as being within so many minutes' walk of the Public Library.
17. Because we do not want Old England to be behind other countries; and the United States, France, Germany, and the Australian Colonies have long ago accepted Public Libraries as absolute necessities.
18. Because the great use of Public Libraries in towns where they have been established has been proved beyond any possible doubt.
19. Because a Public Library provides a place of reference for patents, maps, and technical books, Government documents, etc., to which the artisans in every town should have easy means of access.
20. Because it is said that the workmen of other countries are better educated than ours, and Englishmen are determined that this shall not be so; and as one forward step in this direction every town ought to have a Public Library.
21. Because a Public Library is one of the best investments which a health resort like Worthing can make. Whenever these institutions have been established in watering-places they have been found a great boon by the visitors.