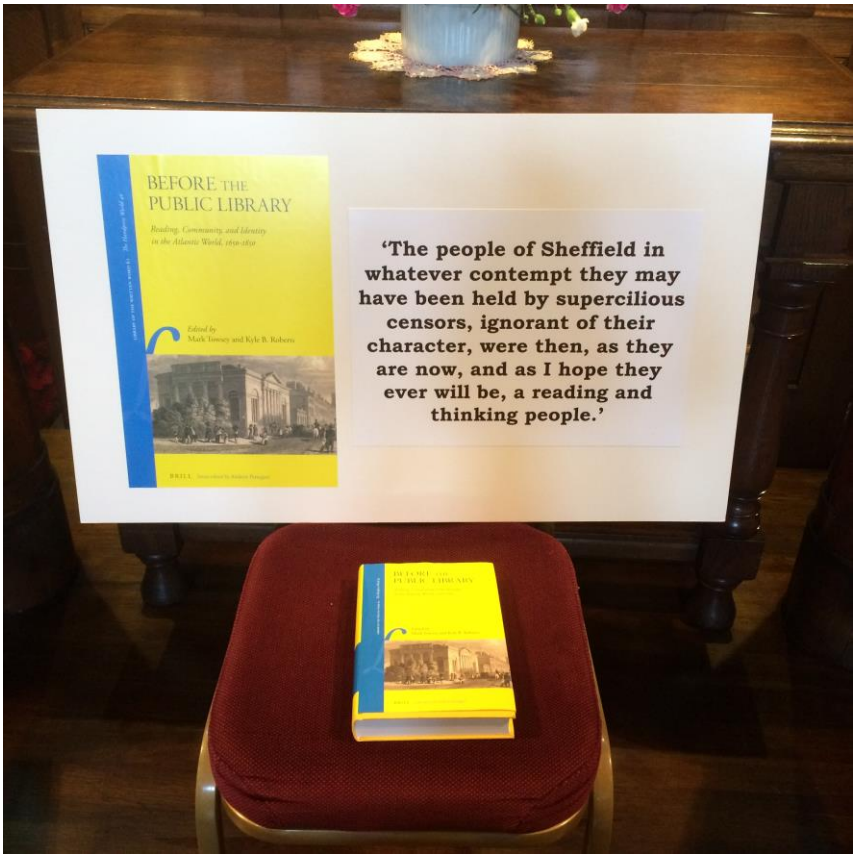
Sheffield Reading History: Unitarians, Book Societies and some Extraordinary Women

A talk by Sue Roe and Loveday Herridge of Reading Sheffield

Here is the first part of the talk, by Loveday Herridge, given on Sunday 9 September 2018, at the Upper Chapel Norfolk Street, Sheffield, as part of the Heritage Open Days Festival 2018. Loveday and Sue have researched the history of Sheffield's first libraries for Reading Sheffield. Their findings are published in Before the Public Library: Reading, Community, and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850, which explores the emergence of community-based lending libraries in the Atlantic World in the two centuries before the public library movement of the mid-nineteenth century.[i]



I will begin by thanking the trustees of Upper Chapel for opening its doors to Sue and me, to celebrate a little known aspect of Sheffield's cultural heritage - its early community libraries. Sadly the buildings associated with these libraries have now largely disappeared, but one of them was actually sited here in this chapel, and the libraries have a very strong connection with the dissenting Upper Chapel. This is because of the importance placed by dissenters not only on religious freedom and civic equality, but also on knowledge and education as a means to human progress. In short, dissenters valued books and libraries. In the dissenting academies, for example, which provided training for dissenting ministers (who were excluded from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge), and also education for lay students, women as well as men, there were substantial and valuable libraries which supported the students' learning.

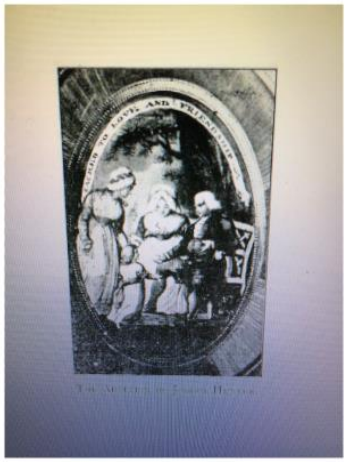
So it is not surprising that the principal founder of Sheffield's first Library - the Subscription Library - was a minister of the Upper Chapel. But there is another reason why Sheffield got its first community library in 1771, under the influence of the Upper Chapel. At this time around half of Sheffield's population were dissenters. These included many of the town's most substantial and influential families, merchants and manufacturers, along with others from the professions. Many of these people were members of Upper Chapel. Their families were ready to invest in culture by supporting a library, and to enjoy the benefits of mutual self-improvement and social standing which membership of the library brought. These two pressures for a library converged among the congregation of the Upper Chapel.

These magnificent portraits show one of the founding members of the Subscription Library and his wife, and they generally hang in the rooms behind the chapel here. They are of the Reverend Joseph Evans, who became minister of this Chapel in 1758, and his wife Susannah. She was the eldest daughter of Thomas Haynes, the minister who preceded Evans here at Upper Chapel and from an old dissenting family. Though we know little about her, I would like to claim her as the first of the 'extraordinary women' whom Sue and I will mention today. She was a woman who according to her adopted son Joseph Hunter, the acclaimed Sheffield antiquarian and historian, 'loved him with more than a mother's love'. She must have been a woman of radical views, as, again according to Hunter, she 'entered into all [her husband's] opinions', and his views, as we shall see, were revolutionary.

The Adoption of Joseph Hunter

This miniature shows Joseph Hunter's adoption aged 6 by Joseph and Susannah Evans.

Hunter's mother hands her child to his new parents in their garden in Portobello, Sheffield.



The portraits, probably painted by Nathaniel Tucker, a Sheffield portraitist, are evidence of the esteem in which the couple must have been held. And there are two other portraits of Susannah which suggest the particular respect she commanded - a drawing in crayon by the Doncaster pastellist John Raphael Smith, and a miniature showing Hunter's adoption. It would be wonderful to locate these. Hunter tells us she kept a household characterised by 'piety and charity', but for the most part sadly she is hidden in the shadows of history.

We know much more about her husband Joseph Evans, the leader of the non-conformist congregation here at Upper Chapel from 1758 to 1798. He was educated at David Jennings' dissenting Academy at Wellclose

Square in Stepney, London (now vanished), where a library and scientific apparatus were important features, and where students were given the very generous sum of £10 (about £1,200) to spend on books on leaving. Hunter tells us he was a man who 'passed his life much respected by everybody', having 'some share in every good work in the town in which he lived', and whose 'manners were plain and simple befitting his character'. His radical politics meant that he supported both the American and French revolutions, and he was a staunch republican to the end of his life.

Joseph Hunter
1783-1861

As a boy, Hunter borrowed books from the Sheffield Subscription Library. He grew up to be Sheffield's famous historian and antiquarian.

But Evans was also a lover of books. In his portrait he holds a copy of a book inscribed 'Locke' - a reference to John Locke, the Enlightenment philosopher. In an essay on reading for young gentlemen Locke maintains that 'reading was for the 'improvement of the Understanding", necessary both to increase personal knowledge and deliver that knowledge to others'.

As a boy Evans' adopted son Joseph Hunter made a catalogue in 1796 of the minister's books and wrote in his diary that Evans had 723 volumes. His teenage diary describes how Evans encouraged him in his reading, by critiquing his book choices and buying him all ten volumes of Encyclopedia Britannica. Hunter would have known that 25 years earlier in 1771, Evans was a founder member of the very library from which he borrowed some of his books - the Sheffield Subscription Library.

The Four Friends

Four members of the Sheffield Subscription Library: George Bennet (missionary), Rowland Hodgson (a Gentleman), James Montgomery (editor of the 'Iris') and Samuel Roberts (manufacturer and social reformer).

What were subscription libraries? They were libraries paid for and chosen by private subscribers from their fees, membership clubs in fact. Some of the first subscription libraries were set up in the great northern cities, the first in 1758 in Liverpool, 1768 in Leeds and Halifax, and Sheffield not far behind in 1771. The Sheffield Subscription Library was in fact copied from the one in Leeds, founded by the rational dissenter and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley, a great supporter of libraries, who we will meet again later. Some years before, Priestley had been an unsuccessful candidate for a post as minister here at the Upper Chapel (he was turned down because he wasn't sufficiently serious), and he was a friend of the man who got the

job, John Dickinson. Dickinson then became co-pastor to Evans. Apparently following their friend Priestley's lead in promoting libraries as a way of delivering knowledge, Dickinson and Joseph Evans established the Sheffield Library in Norfolk Street in 1771. And that, we think, is how the Library began.

Who belonged - or subscribed - to the Library? We know that the Library had 59 members in 1778, and 16 of those can be definitely identified as non-conformist. Among the members were clergy, and the families of manufacturers and merchants, with four medical men. There was also a druggist, four legal practitioners, a brewer, a printer and a bookseller, and the two founders of the first Sheffield Bank. Seven of them were women. As the membership grew, it continued to be dominated by merchants and manufacturers in the cutlery trades and the new industries based on steel, silver and silver plate, and by the professional men who serviced these communities. Many were prominent among the Town Trustees, the Church Burgesses and the Company of Cutlers. They took pride in local culture, using their surplus wealth to support Sheffield's own authors, and buying books by authors with Yorkshire associations. A small number of members were writers themselves. Some were also members of one or more of Sheffield's other elite cultural associations and clubs, and some were members of the other book associations we're discussing today.

What were the rules of the Library? It was run by a president and a five-member committee which met monthly. Any member could attend and vote on the choice of books. In 1800 the joining fee was 3 guineas, or about £140 in today's money, with an annual payment of 10s or £25. And from the early 1800s the membership fees grew more expensive. So the cost of belonging to the Library made it a fairly exclusive group.

The Library was established at a pivotal historical moment in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when radical ideas were rife in Sheffield. The American and then the French revolutions challenged and excited all thinking readers; several of the famous contemporary books sympathetic to the revolutions and to progressive politics were available at the Library, as well as some which opposed them. But the Library had to maintain a careful political balancing act, for there were government spies in Sheffield and it was known as a dangerous centre of radical politics. I can illustrate this by mentioning that in the local studies library there are two surviving versions of the 1792 catalogue. One printed copy shows the Library possessed Tom Paine's ground-breaking Rights of Man, while the second copy does not list the book. How can this be explained? The Library perhaps could not be seen to be too radical a place as it was a cultural centre for prominent residents, and decided to suppress Paine's book on second thoughts. However, the membership lists showed that supporters of republican ideas managed to borrow books, alongside members with more conservative opinions. In the 1802 membership list, for example, we see the names of both John Brookfield, the Sheffield attorney of extreme Tory views who conducted the first prosecution for sedition against James Montgomery, radical political writer, and Montgomery himself, only recently released from prison for the crime.

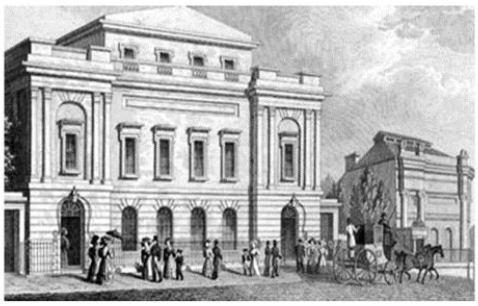
James Montgomery
1771-1854

Radical editor of Sheffield's newspaper, the 'Iris', Montgomery served two spells in prison for sedition.

He later became a renowned hymn writer.

Surrey Street
Music Hall

The Subscription Library moved to the new Music Hall in 1823.



The Subscription Library lasted until 1907 when its collection was taken over by the Literary and Philosophical Society. By the time the Central Library had opened in 1934 it had absorbed the Lit and Phil's. But before I leave the Library I want to mention the second librarian of the Sheffield Library who was, very unusually, a woman - Esther Saunders, our second extraordinary woman. We know little about the early keepers of the holdings of subscription libraries, but almost certainly they were generally male. Esther certainly made an impact on the Library.

Her tenure was a long one. She became Librarian in 1777 when the previous (probably the first) Librarian died. This was her father, Joseph Saunders, from whom she must have learned her profession; he had worked at the Harleian Library in Oxford. The founders of the Library must have been pleased to employ a librarian with connections to such an important collection. And at Saunders' death, Esther's skills made her the obvious replacement.

The Library was actually in her father's house in Norfolk Street - all the books were there. Esther was responsible for all loans and the numbering of books. She must also have been responsible for producing the annual catalogues. These catalogues were arranged in subject groupings, such as 'Voyages and Travel', 'Authors Moral, Scientifical and Miscellaneous', and 'Geography and Topography'. Such groupings were not universally adopted among other libraries and a librarian evidently followed their own inclination and the subject matter of the books in the collection to devise their groupings. Esther arranged the books alphabetically within each group.

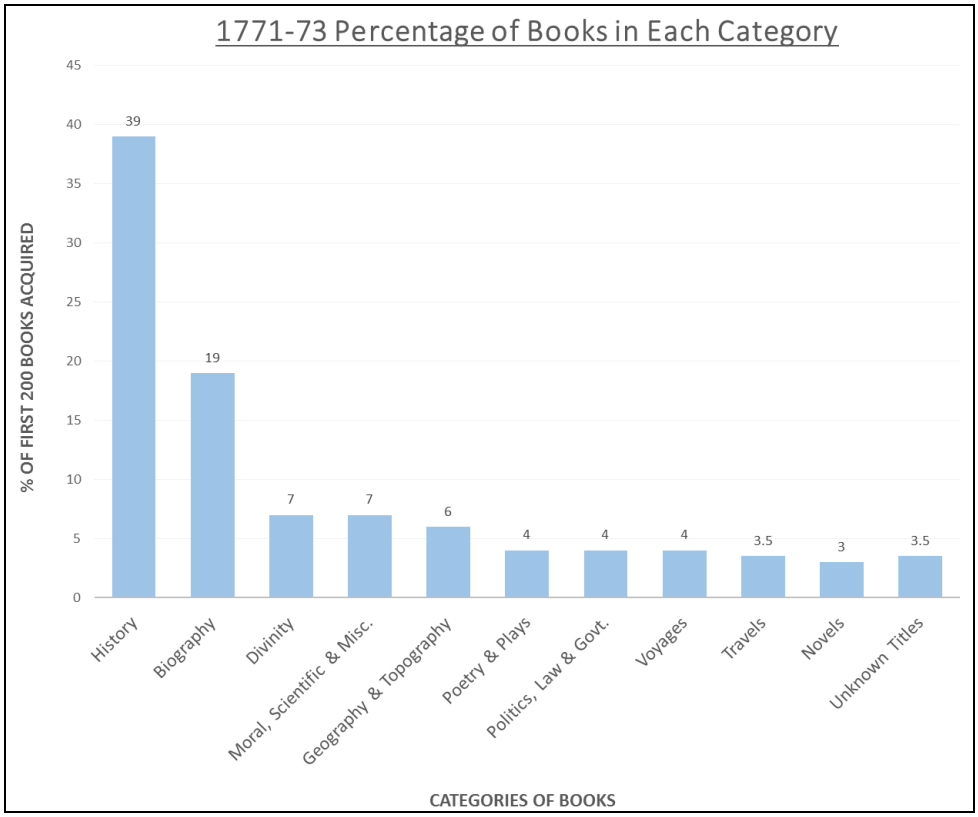
Which books did the Library's members choose? Shown below are: the choices of the first members of the Subscription Library in 1771-73; choices from 1802; and a list of the first books chosen.

We can see that in 1771-73 by far the majority of the books (39 per cent) are in the history category, with biography coming second with 19 per cent. Seven per cent of the books are the poetry, plays and novels categories.

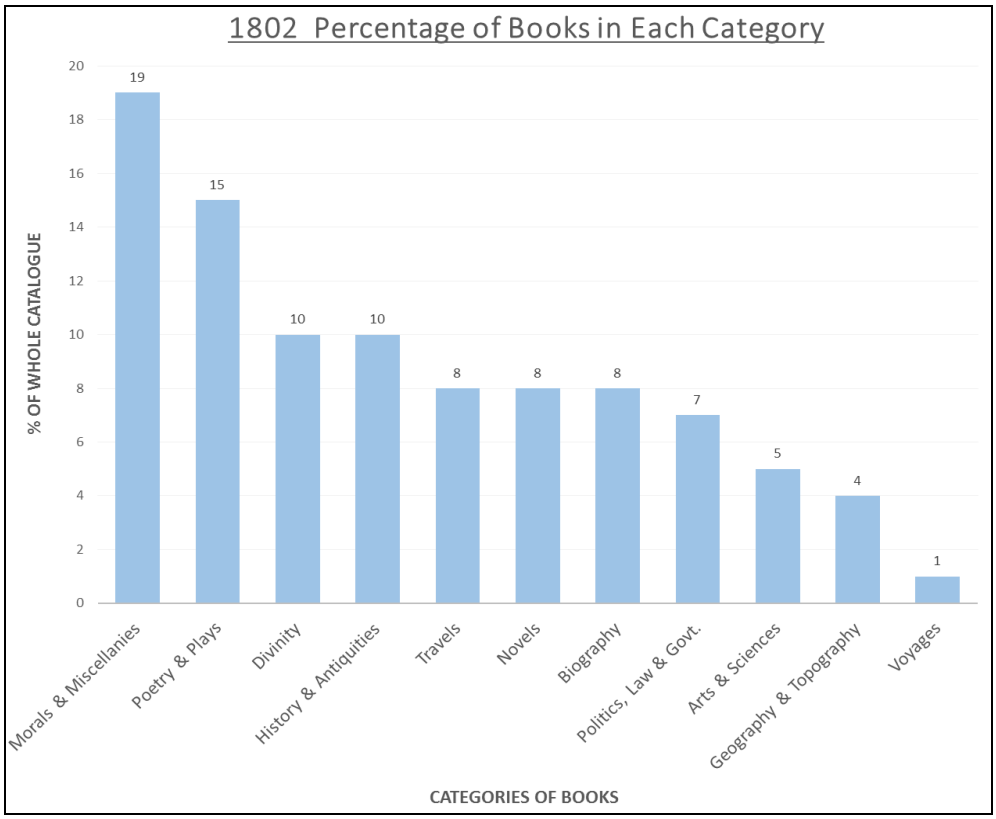
By 1802 there is quite a change in book preferences, even allowing for slightly different categorisations. In 1802 Morals and Miscellaneous - very broadly, philosophical works - are in the majority with 19 per cent of the books. Twenty-three per cent of the books are Poetry, Plays and Novels, literature clearly becoming increasingly attractive.

However, as Esther numbered the books it is possible to tell which were the very first books purchased by the Library's members in 1771: books numbered 1, 2 and 3 are lost, but number 4 is 'Dalrymple's Memoirs of Great Britain vol.1', a worthy history book written by a Scottish enlightenment lawyer, and number 5 is 'Cawthorne's Poems' - James Cawthorne was born in Sheffield. These then were the first choices of the majority of the members of the Library.

Book Choices of First Members of the Subscription Library



Book Choices of Members of the Subscription Library in 1802



First Books Purchased by the Subscription Library

First 3 books are unknown
[John] Dalrymple's Memoirs of Great Britain vol 1 1771 [A history of the English revolution and relations with France]
[James] Cawthorne's Poems 1771 [A Sheffield poet]
Le Chapped Anteroche's Travels in Siberia 1768 [Chappe d'Auteroche] [Scientific observations on an astronomical event in Siberia]
[Edmund] Cartwright's Armine and Elvira 1772 [A Doncaster inventor and poet]
[Hugh]Walpole's Anecdotes of Painting (4 vols) 1762-1780 [Biographical history of the arts in England]
[William] Mason's English Garden 1772-82 [A Rotherham gardener and poet]
[Francis Blackburne] Reflections on the Fate of the Clergy's Petition 1774 [Sympathised with the dissenting clergy]
[James] Whitaker's History of Manchester 1771 vol 1 (2 vols) [Born in Manchester]
[James] Whitaker's Origin of the Britons 1772 [History of early British people]
[Georg Steller] History of Kamschatka [date unknown] [Ethnographic Study of Alaska][Francis] Sullivan's Lectures on the Feudal Law [Constitutional history]
[Probably by Joseph Priestley] Political Essay on the State of the British Government 1768 [A defence of religious dissenters]
[Perhaps John Armstrong] Oeconomy of Beauty 1735 [Perhaps Oeconomy of Love - a guide to love]
[Anna Laetitia Barbauld] Aikins (Miss) Poems 1773 [A huge success]

The publication dates tell us that the Library started fairly slowly. It must have been quite a small collection at first. But it's worth noticing how most purchases are very up-to-date, with books bought that have been recently published, perhaps heard about by word of mouth or reviewed in the latest cultural magazines.

Did Esther load the shelves in their groups, by number, or alphabetically? There was no reading room and the room was cramped. How did potential readers 'browse'? We know from his diary that the young Hunter poked around in boxes speculatively. But other adult readers perhaps used the catalogue at home - it appears that every member may have been issued with a catalogue - and by exploiting Esther's prodigious knowledge of the Library. On 3 July 1797 the young Joseph Hunter noted in his diary that Esther impressed him by remembering the number of a book.

But some of the problems which Esther's long librarianship brought are also hinted at in Hunter's diary. He mentions that she allowed him to keep Mrs Radcliffe's The Italian for longer than he should, and allowed him to take out Varieties of Literature illegally, although she drew the line at issuing him another book when he had not brought back Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto. Thomas Asline Ward, the author of an account of the Library, tells us in 1825 that by 1819, just after her death, the library was in 'a desolate condition'. The books were dirty and tattered, and the rules were not adhered to, so that many books were lost, because the Librarian was 'not in constant attendance'. He said that favourite books were reserved for favourite readers, and the publications most eagerly sought after were concealed in cupboards, drawers and even in the warming pan. Ward tells us that in 1787 she married, and then until 1805 she was paid only 12 guineas (about £11,000 in today's money). Interestingly, he blames the Library's problems firmly on this low wage, saying that 'for such a small sum no one could attend constantly in the room'. 'The Librarian was allowed to manage her household affairs and the Library neglected.' Indeed, this may be the first expression of the difficulty facing a female librarian on a low wage struggling to juggle work and home life!

After 1805 she was paid 17 guineas and in 1810 there was an attempt to pension her off, as it was felt she was too old to continue with her duties, but 'feelings of compassion' prevailed. In 1816 Esther's wage was raised to £30 (about £23,000) on condition she worked full time in the Library, but according to Ward it was too late. There was an attempt by a group of members to set up a new subscription library, but the opportunity for reform was seized by the committee at Esther's death in 1818.

An 'Elegy' to Esther Caterer by John Holland

.....When gentles came in studious mood
To fash their brains 'mang larning's brood,
Or tak' their meal o' mental food,
Wi' ready head
She ken'd where every volume stood.

Auld Esther's dead.....

An affectionate poem appeared in Sheffield's newspaper, the Iris, which mourned the death of a cheerful, honest chatterbox, who knew where every book was shelved. Esther remains a tantalising figure, who tells us a lot but as ever not enough, about the Library, but she deserves to be remembered as an Extraordinary woman and Sheffield's first female librarian.

In the Upper Chapel in 1793 a second book society was formed - the Reading and Conversation Society of the Upper Chapel, or Vestry Library. The books must have been shelved and the members met just here in the Vestry. The Rules tell us that the members met every other Monday evening at 7pm. There was a treasurer who kept the Society's cash, a librarian, who led the meetings, ordered and recorded the books, and a committee of five (including the treasurer and librarian), who voted for the books alongside any other members who attended the meetings. Fees to the Vestry Library were low - 2s 6d [£10] for admission with 6d [£4] to be paid every six weeks in advance for membership, and may have been set at that level to attract members of quite limited means. However, the first membership list of the Vestry Library only tentatively confirms its greater social reach.

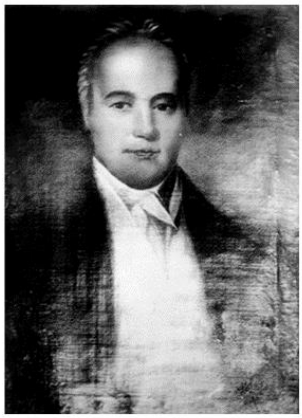
Who were these members? There were 16 founder members in 1793, three of whom were already members of the Subscription Library. Among the 16 the librarian was a substantial brewer, the treasurer was a solicitor and on the committee were also: a minister; Joseph Gales, the radical publisher of Sheffield's campaigning newspaper, the Register; and one whose occupation is unknown. Of the remaining 11, two were cutlers and two more were ministers. One of these was Joseph Evans of the Upper Chapel again, and it is tempting to think that Evans was again the prime mover behind the library. Alongside him was Benjamin Naylor, his co-pastor, who also part-owned a silver-plating firm. One more was a bookseller, one was a surgeon and the others' occupations are unknown.

Joseph Gales
1786-1860

Gales was the radical editor of the Sheffield newspaper, the 'Register', and campaigned for Parliamentary reform.

He was a member of the Vestry Library.

Accused of treason he fled to America.



At the outset, the Library had strong connections with radical politics, for certainly at least three of the early members were known by the state as dangerous agitators. One of them, Joseph Gales, the editor of the Sheffield Register and an advocate of parliamentary reform and the abolition of slavery amongst other things, was forced to flee to America when he was pursued by government agents, enraged by his activities and his writing. However, the names of Sheffield's familiar leading Unitarian manufacturers, ministers and professional men sit next to others, who were perhaps tradesmen and artisans.

Membership of the library was restricted to members of the congregation and the library's purpose was 'religious improvement ... by reading and conversation'. This suggests an arrangement where books could be borrowed, and then formally discussed with like minded people. This element of discussion is unusual in a community library, and suggests a dynamic and sociable fortnightly meeting for Vestry Library members. Sadly there are no women's names among the lists for the first few years of the library.

What kinds of books were chosen? For the first five years only religious books were allowed, and plays and novels were subsequently banned. The initial handwritten lists of books are difficult to read but the selection, though on a much smaller scale, has similarities with the Subscription Library - Joseph Priestley's work, biography, travel books, books on the English constitution and history. The records are sparse but the Vestry Library appears to have lasted at the Upper Chapel until 1839, when it fades from view.

I haven't spent much time on the authors who were chosen by the members of the Subscription Library but I will end with one who was favoured by the Library. She was famously considered extraordinary for most of her lifetime, but fell from grace right at the end of her career, and her name now is virtually unknown. This is Anna Laetitia Aiken, or Anna Laetitia Barbauld, a dissenter and poet, teacher, essay writer, editor and critic.

She became a writer of international acclaim - admired by the young Walter Scott, and the young Coleridge, and by Boston Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing, whose nephew is remembered in Channing Hall. And as with so many educated and engaged dissenting families, her social networks were widespread and overlapping. For example, she had links with Sheffield. Her uncle was David Jennings, whose academy in Stepney Joseph Evans had attended. When her friend Joseph Priestley was living in Leeds, she might well have taken a detour through Sheffield to visit him, perhaps visiting Upper Chapel. She wrote about Sheffield's James Montgomery in a letter to Maria Edgeworth, admiring his poems and sympathising with his situation. Her brother John Aiken, also a writer, and Montgomery were friends who corresponded regularly.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld
1743-1825

Barbauld was a poet, teacher and political writer.

Venerated for most of her life, her poem 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven' was widely criticised and she fell from grace

Born in 1743 in Kibworth in Leicestershire into a comfortably off family, her first home was in the boys' school where her father taught, close to the chapel where he occasionally preached. She could read at the age of two. Surrounded by boys, she acquired the intellectual tools of a modern young man and early on understood how constrained a girl's life was. She read and re-read the books in her father's library,

appreciating science for its evidence of divine order. When she was 15, her father was offered a job at the prestigious Warrington academy. One of the teachers there was Joseph Priestley, and he and his wife became a second family to Barbauld, encouraging her to write her first poems. Her first published book of poems in 1773 was a huge success. Interestingly, it was the twentieth book purchased by the Subscription Library, an early choice. Next she published a book of essays written with her adored younger brother John, which the Library also purchased. This was followed by her Devotional Pieces, a collection of psalms with an essay on religion, the third of her books to be bought by the Library. Her fame, prestige and brilliance made her an appropriate choice for the Library subscribers, who were no slouches when it came to buying fashionable books.

In 1774 she married Rochemont Barbauld who had been educated at Warrington, and with him she ran Palgrave Academy in Suffolk where, unable to have children, they adopted one of her younger brother's children. Inspired by her work as a teacher and by her love for her child, she wrote textbooks and literature for children which were extraordinarily popular and revolutionary in their approach. Written in a conversational style, they encouraged sensory learning techniques and increased in difficulty as the child's knowledge increased.

Portraits in the Characters of the Muses in the Temple of Apollo, by Richard Samuel 1778

Britain's artistic and intellectual women are celebrated in this portrait.

Anna Barbauld is the tall Muse, second from left, though it is not an actual likeness.

By 1779 Barbauld's reputation was such that she could be painted as a Muse, an inspiration for the age. The painting was displayed at the Royal Academy.

A period of more political writing followed with works decrying the refusal of Parliament to repeal the Test Acts or to abolish the slave trade. Evenings at Home, a book of children's stories which in his diary Joseph Hunter mentions he read, was purchased by the Library, as was her sermon, Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation. This discussed the moral responsibility of the individual for the actions of the nation. She then turned her attention to literary criticism, her work culminating in a huge work on the British novelists. In 1808, her husband, who appears to have had episodes of insanity, committed suicide. Her final work, 1811, a poem criticising Britain's participation in the Napoleonic Wars and suggesting that the country was ruining itself, summed up a lifetime of reflection and declared her beliefs. It was widely considered defeatist, unpatriotic, scandalous and very nearly treasonable, including by such celebrities as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb and Southey. To his credit, Sheffield's James Montgomery, read it, as he said, 'with great pleasure and with ..... melancholy misgivings'. But the anger and controversy it provoked seem to have caused her to withdraw almost entirely from writing.

Barbauld died in 1825, and though many voices remembered her into the Victorian age, she has sadly been largely neglected. More recently she has been rediscovered by feminist commentators. Her memorial in St Mary's Unitarian Chapel in Stoke Newington, London reads:

> Endowed by the giver of all good
> With wit, genius, poetic talent and a vigorous understanding
> She employed these high gifts

in promoting the cause of humanity, peace and justice
of civil and religious liberty
of pure, ardent, affectionate devotion...

which seem fitting words for an extraordinary woman.

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[i] Before the Public Library Reading, Community, and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850. Edited by Mark Towsey, University of Liverpool, and Kyle B. Roberts, Loyola University Chicago (Leiden, Brill, 2017).