

Annual Report for Reading Sheffield 2020

Introduction

This report on the activities of Reading Sheffield in October 2020 accounts for 18 rather than 12 months. Our last Annual General Meeting was due to be held in March 2020 and because of lockdown was postponed.

We are very grateful to those of you who paid your subscription in March, despite the postponement of the AGM. Due to your subscriptions and some generous donations we were able to maintain our website for the next two years with WordPress for a payment of £177.48. We are very grateful to Lizz for arranging this for us and to Lizz and Dennis Tuckerman for taking responsibility for technical maintenance of the site. We now have the reserves to pay a similar sum in two years to preserve our website and to house much of our research.

Links with reading communities

During the last two years we have continued to engage with local reading communities.

- **The Venue at Stocksbridge:** In May 2019 Sue Roe and Mary Grover visited the Venue at Stocksbridge to discuss the reading of a large group of retirees who meets there every week. Following our talks, the members of the club shared with us reading memories from their childhood and early adulthood. From these memories Sue and Mary compiled a booklet of reading memories which we printed and distributed to the readers we had met. They were very appreciative of the feedback and the value put on their responses.
- **The University Women's Group:** In October 2020 Mary gave a talk on our readers' response to Dickens in the 1930s and 40s. It was a very responsive audience. One member has since lent Mary a copy of a 1910 paperback edition of *Hard Times* (Lloyds' sixpenny Dickens). You can find an illustrated copy of Mary's talk, Dickens and Thirties Sheffield, under Research on our website.

Partnership with Sheffield Libraries

We continue to work closely with Sheffield Libraries as opportunities arise and are enormously grateful to Dan Marshall and his library and archive colleagues for their continuing interest and support.

In late 2019 and early 2020, with support from Sheffield Hallam University, we had discussions with library staff and archives about contributing to Sheffield Libraries' planned Year of Reading 2020 festival. Our proposal was for a series of exhibitions and associated talks about reading cultures in Sheffield, drawing on our research and on material held by Sheffield Libraries. We contributed to the introductory exhibition held in the Central Library's entrance lobby and we designed the content for an exhibition about Sheffield's early libraries based on the research of Sue Roe

and Loveday Herridge which was due to open in The Winter Gardens on 30th March, but this was cancelled due to the lockdown. This was supported by Dan Marshall and his design team at Sheffield Central Library and looks very good. The exhibition boards designed and prepared by Sheffield Libraries are all prepared and we hope the exhibition can go ahead when normal life is restored.

As a result of the pandemic, Sheffield Libraries developed their digital programming, including a new series of podcasts. Val Hewson contributed a talk on Walter Parsonson, who between 1855 and 1873 established Sheffield's public library service. This is available via the new Podcasts section on our website.

We hope too to be able to pick up our other Year of Reading ideas for exhibitions and talks, again in partnership with Sheffield Libraries.

Heritage Open Days events

For several years now we have contributed illustrated talks during the annual Heritage Open Days festivals, again often in collaboration with Sheffield Libraries. In September 2019, we gave two well-received talks in the Carpenter Room at the Central Library:

- **Joseph Lamb:** Val Hewson gave a talk about Joseph Lamb, Sheffield's City Librarian between 1927 and 1956, who arguably made Sheffield Libraries one of the best services in the country in the 20th century. Lamb was responsible for, among other things, the design and building of the Central Library and a number of branch libraries and the refurbishment of others; an unprecedented growth in the number of books borrowed; and the establishment of the SINTO (an information and research partnership between local industry, the library service and the university).
- **Early Reformers:** Loveday Herridge and Sue Roe discussed the contribution that 18th and 19th century reformers made to Sheffield's identity, culture and growth through their championship of the first libraries in the town. Some of the readers in Sheffield's early community libraries turned out to be the movers and shakers of the town during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. James Montgomery, Thomas Ward and Joseph Gales were editors of three of Sheffield's notable early newspapers. We also looked at key figures in the Sheffield Book Society and Sheffield Book Club and the important role played by the members who were medical men in improving the health and treatment of the people of Sheffield.

In 2020 we were not able, for obvious reasons, to participate in the festival, but hope to do so next year.

Creative responses to Reading Sheffield

We all enjoyed the launch of Eleanor Brown's collection, *White Ink Stains*, at the Off the Shelf Festival in October 2019 and hugely appreciated her generosity in giving a reading specifically for our readers this year at The Art House Cafe in Carver Street. In September 2020 she recorded a podcast for The Festival of the Mind. As always, Eleanor's reading of her poems was powerful and moving. Throughout her

podcast she made compelling links between the value that libraries had in the lives of our readers and the need for free provision of educational and imaginative sustenance in contemporary communities. Eleanor's podcast is available via the Podcasts section of our website.

Links with Sheffield Hallam University

We wish Professor Chris Hopkins very well for his retirement from Sheffield Hallam in December. He has been an exceptionally good friend to us. When Chris was head of Humanities Research at Sheffield Hallam University he gave financial support to many of our key projects: our annual events for interviewees and the funding of creative responses to our material from Ray Hearne, Jean Compton, Lizz Tuckerman and Eleanor Brown.

Recently Chris, Val and Mary have been in discussion with local dramatist and director, James Stone, who was to be commissioned to write and produce a play about the contrasting library cultures of Boots Booklovers' Libraries, the tuppenny libraries and the municipal library services. It had been hoped that the play would tour Sheffield in June 2020. Sadly, the pandemic has made this impossible, but we hope to use the preparatory research Mary and Val did at some future date. Chris, Val and Mary are exploring ways additional ways of contrasting the library cultures in Sheffield in the Thirties and Forties.

This Reading Sheffield project is only one of many which Chris has supported. In 2019 he offered Val Hewson and Mary Grover Honorary Visiting Fellowships. This has been invaluable to them both, enabling them to access academic journals and other resources. It has also helped foster links between our project and the wider university community. This autumn Chris and his colleague Ana Maria Sanchez have created a module for undergraduates in a module called 'Ideas into Action'. This module enables students to access, explore and extend the resources of Reading Sheffield, and in the process to think about their own reading journeys. We expect to have around 12 undergraduates share their work with us and to contribute to our blog. Val Hewson is leading the involvement of Reading Sheffield in this project. The podcast of her interview with Ana Maria gave undergraduates a clear sense of how they might both explore and develop the material we have on our website. Chris has recorded a talk on how to develop research skills. (Both will be posted on our website.) We look forward to seeing how the students make our material their own.

Many of our members are involved with Sheffield Hallam's monthly Popular Fiction reading groups led by Chris Hopkins. We will continue to benefit from Chris's guidance and involvement both in a personal capacity and as Emeritus Professor for the next six years. We have in the past given talks to the reading groups and held joint events, and we hope to continue this.

Website and social media

Our website is in many ways our home. Our original interviews with Sheffield readers - the starting point for all our work, to which we return time after time - are hosted there, for anyone to read and/or listen to. We record our various activities and events there, including the publications, art and poetry inspired by Sheffield's readers. Our

original research about Sheffield, reading and libraries is recorded there, for anyone to draw on.

We continue to add to the website regularly. This year, for example, we have: posted blogs by three Sheffields under the age of 12; started to explore the work of Sheffield's Victorian and Edwardian librarians; told the story of how Walter Greenwood's novel *Love on the Dole* came to Sheffield; and made a home for the podcasts we have done and our new work with Sheffield Hallam students. As always, we welcome contributions to the website, comments on its content and subscribers.

Website statistics (to date)

- 173 blog posts
- Most overall searches per day: 226 views on 14 August 2020
- All time total number views: 41,434
- All time comments: 136
- Top post: Sheffield City of the Book

We continue to be very active on social media, in order to raise awareness of our research and activities. For example, on Twitter the chief executive of CILIP, the professional association for libraries and information, described our blog post about the 1909 Library Association conference in Sheffield as 'very special'. Our research about the history of Tinsley Carnegie Library, disseminated through Twitter and Facebook, has been used by campaigners hoping to have the library re-opened, and has been quoted in the local press. We now have 1,165 followers on Twitter, where we focus our efforts, and 83 on Facebook. Our best-ever tweet, about age in Jane Austen's novels, generated about 500 likes.

Steel City Readers: Reading in Sheffield 1930-1950

Lockdown has given Mary Grover an excellent opportunity to recast her book on Sheffield reading in the Thirties in response the comments of two academic readers who have been extremely helpful. It is now waiting for a response from two more readers, one a book historian and the other an anthropologist. She is enormously grateful to the many people who have read individual chapters, and of course, to the 65 interviewees and the team of interviewers who gathered these invaluable personal histories of becoming a reader. It is clear that the collection of these histories is a unique project.

The Future of Reading Sheffield

Mary Grover, the retiring Chair of Reading Sheffield has been constantly delighted and surprised at the paths taken by Reading Sheffield in the ten years since it was first formed, initially to collect the reading memories of our city from the first half of the twentieth century. We have branched out in all sorts of unexpected ways, made firm friends and developed strong partnerships in and beyond Sheffield, both in person and online.

We would encourage you to come to the Annual General Meeting with ideas of your own about we can take the work of the organisation forward.

Mary Grover
Chair of Reading Sheffield
November 2020