

Some Notes on the Public Library, Bangor, Gwynedd (March 2001)



An old photograph of the façade: "NEW CARNEGIE LIBRARY, BANGOR  
OPENED BY LORD PENRHYN. Nov 8th [19]07".

This photograph can be seen in *BANGOR A Pictorial History* (Volume 2) by John Cowell 1997, page 40, with the following text:

"A generous gift of £2,500 from Andrew Carnegie, a wealthy American philanthropist, enabled the city council to build a new library in 1907. This replaced the old 'Free Library & Reading Room' which had been housed in cramped accommodation above Captain Jones's museum near the bottom of Lôn Pobty. An appeal was made to the public for books to add to the 4,000 transferred from the old library, and £250 was allocated for the purchase of new ones. Today, the library boasts a stock of over 36,000 books."

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Peter Ellis Jones' book: *BANGOR 1883-1983 A Study in Municipal Government*, Cardiff (UWP) 1986, includes various pieces of information. Before 1883, the Local Board succeeded in acquiring a library and reading room. (From pp.46-5): "Capt. John Jones, a native of Bangor, established a museum in 1851 to exhibit his unique collection of curios, which he had acquired from many lands in the course of a long career at sea. He offered his collection in 1870 to the local Board, entreating it to act as trustee for the citizens of Bangor, so that the collection might be preserved and enlarged. Unfortunately the Board was not able to accept the gift since it had no authority to levy a rate for the running and maintenance of the establishment. The Board viewed the gift as a foundation for its broader vision of a library, reading room and exhibition hall complex, and determined not to let this opportunity pass. A petition was presented to the Secretary of State for the Home Department entreating him to draft a Bill which would enable Local Boards to adopt the Public Libraries Act, 1855. An Act was subsequently passed which embodied this request, and at a meeting of ratepayers held in November 1870 the proposed adoption of the Public Libraries Act by the Local Board was approved. Lord Penrhyn granted a lease of the museum premises for thirty years at a nominal rent, a committee of management was set up and a penny in the £ was added to the General District Rate for its upkeep. The museum was opened free to the public on 1 March 1871 and the library and

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reading room were opened on 1 January 1873. The institution proved extremely popular: the annual report for 1881 records the issue of 4,260 books and a daily average use by 105 persons. A Working Men's Improvement Society met in the library and was the means whereby scores of young men extended their elementary education. 'Thus we conclude', says the 1881 Report, 'the reading room, in conjunction with the library is discharging no unimportant function to the community. We are quite prepared to contest the number of our daily visitors with any other public house in the town'. (This final quotation from the North Wales Chronicle 7 January 1882)

The first Council, after Bangor had received its charter in 1883, took over responsibility from the Local Board for the maintenance of the library and museum.

(P.E.Jones, p. 74): "The rented building on High Street was too cramped, books were old and in poor condition, and valuable pictures were deteriorating under the attack of mould and moths. Fewer than a thousand books were issued in the early years of the century, and a councillor averred in 1904 that the library 'was a disgrace to a town which lays claim to the title of the Athens of Wales'.

As the council was considering the future of the institution, whose lease was due to expire, it came to hear of the gifts of money that Mr Andrew Carnegie, the wealthy American steel magnate and philanthropist, was making for the purpose of establishing libraries. On application to Carnegie the council was granted the sum of £2,500, to which it added £300 from Capt. John Jones's legacy. With these sums in mind, architects were invited to submit designs for a new library which was to be 'worthy of the place'. A site was chosen on a portion of the former Bishop's Park Estate fronting onto a proposed new road, Ffordd Gwynedd, and the successful architects were Messrs. Dixon and Potter of Manchester. The library is built of .. red Ruabon brick with dressings of stone from the Stancliffe Quarries, Darley Dale, Derbyshire, and roofed with Penrhyn Quarry slates. A notable feature is the octagonal hall, 16'6" x 16'6", which is covered with a dome. A penny rate which the council was allowed to raise for its upkeep yielded £600 a year, and this sum was considered a sufficient amount. When the wording of the title to be inscribed on the stone ornament above the entrance was discussed, it was suggested that it should be in English and Welsh. Alderman Henry Lewis thought the lettering would be too cramped, and his suggestion that 'Llyfrgell Rhydd 1907' only should be inscribed was carried. Rather than lay the conventional foundation stone, the council decided to erect a brass tablet in the entrance hall, on which a suitable inscription was engraved. The library was opened by the third Lord Penrhyn on 8 November 1907."

(P.E.Jones p.145) "In 1915 [during the First World War], ...the 'St. Helens Pals' were billeted in the city, and the council installed hot and cold water baths in the basement of the library. This facility was well patronized in the 1920s but, as the number of council houses equipped with a bath steadily increased, the number of people using it declined; for 1937 and 1938 the average was only 1,325 persons, and the enterprise was losing money."

[In the 1920's,] "another municipal service, the library and museum, also faced hard times, since the council was able to levy only a penny rate for its upkeep, and it was £800 in debt by 1925. A new librarian in 1930 succeeded in raising the number of books issued from around 8,000 a year in the late 1920s to 40,000 in the late 1930s, but the museum was a more intractable problem..

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(P.E.Jones p.209) "Books borrowed from the library increased from less than 70,000 a year in 1945 to over 200,000 in 1970. The library was remodelled in the late 1950s to give it a more welcoming appearance, and a children's library was designated. A collection of music on records and cassettes was established in the mid 1960s."

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An architectural description of the Library was published in **Cadw** -- *Welsh Historic Monuments List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest* (1988), p.23, Cadw Ref No: 42/A/37 (4):

"Detached midway along the street [Ffordd Gwynedd].

Dated 1907; by A E Dixon and C H Potter of Manchester. Edwardian Baroque single storey 3-bay Ruabon brick front with ashlar dressings; slate roofs. Central dome flanked by gable-ended cross-ranges, with open pediment treatment. Deep kneelers, festoons and broad end-pilaster strips. Venetian windows to outer bays with small panes, colonnettes and aprons. Set back central bay, formed of lower entrance with dentil cornice parapet and enriched oval shield with lettering "Llyfrgell R[h]ydd 1907. Cornice cambered over gated entrance, with narrow small-pane windows in architraves to either side. Segmental roof to porch with part-glazed double doors. Lead roof dome behind, with octagonal lantern, small-pane glazed.

Cornice continues around 6-bay right side. First two bays have bullseye windows with keystones rising to cornice; gable-end of the main range is advanced, with similar but plainer detail to that on the front (Venetian windows etc...) Three bays to rear have short segmental headed windows with aprons., Two similar gable-ends to rear with round, small-pane, attic windows and Venetian derived window below.

The interior has an octagonal inner porch lit by the dome, which has foliage-ornamented plaster border to the base, and egg-and-dart cornice. Segmental roof to right inside, with ornamented plaster ribs. Art nouveau radiators. Copper tablet to porch commemorates the benefactors of the Library, largely paid for by Andrew Carnegie. Reference: M L Clarke, "Notes on the Architecture of Bangor" (unpublished), p.3 (no date)."

(Information sheet compiled by Bangor Civic Society, March 2001)