

Historical Background:

The history of the Library has been well documented, both by the first University Librarian, Agnes Cuming, and more especially by Philip Larkin. In brief, the Library first opened its doors to readers on 8 March 1929, some months after the University College had officially commenced operations in October 1928, and just one month after Agnes Cuming took up her post. She therefore had little or no say in the design of the Library. The next few decades were something of a struggle for Miss Cuming and her small staff. Whilst the bookstock, for which funding was initially quite generous, grew quite rapidly (with some 40,000 volumes in the first three years), the associated buildings were quite inadequate. By the 1950s the result was, as Larkin put it, 'a series of badly-designed, ill-lit, sometimes unheated and frequently unrelated areas', with the main location on the ground floor of the what become known as the Science and Social building - one of just two main buildings owned by the University until the 1940s.

In October 1930 a second floor of the same wing of the Science and Social building was taken over - unfortunately separated from the ground floor rooms by the intervening Senior Common Room, with only a hand-operated book lift between them. By 1939 there were still only four Library staff, including the Librarian, a total immediately reduced to two at the outset of the Second World War. As a result of the threat of enemy bombing, during 1939-1940 much of the stock had to be re-located both within the College and, in the case of rare books and manuscripts, to vicarages and other houses within the region.² Things were little better during the years after the re-constitution of the Library during 1945. By 1948 the staff still numbered only six, with the Librarian, one senior assistant, and four library assistants. A Deputy Librarian (Arthur Wood) was appointed from October 1948. There was no proper entrance or issue desk until 1951, when connecting stairs were at last built between the two floors of the Library. Expansion was catered for by housing much bookstock (along with many reader spaces) in outlying rooms and one large 'temporary' hut, later known as the Sub-Library.

By the time of Miss Cuming's retirement in March 1955, there was still no purpose-built Library, but there were about 125,000 books and 11 staff.

Custodial history: Donated by Vera Rutherford (nee Jones), Durham, 15 May 1989

Description: Personal recollections of Miss Agnes Cuming and the early days of the library from a former member of staff who worked in the University Library in the mid 1930s

Extent: 1 item

Related material: Records of the Brynmor Jones Library [U LIB]

Access conditions: Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX192/1

Miss Agnes Cuming: a personal memoir
Brief personal recollections of Miss Agnes Cuming
by Mrs Vera Rutherford (nee Jones)
1 item

1989