

A Gift So Graciously Bestowed: The Prince Consort's Library

A Talk by Paul Vickers

We were delighted to welcome back local historian and author Paul Vickers for a lively, informative and entertaining presentation on The Prince Consort's Library, a building with which he is intimately familiar, having been associated with it since 1983.

Paul began by explaining that the library can be used only by serving members of the armed forces or by current employees of the Ministry of Defence. However, there are opportunities for the public to visit during the annual Army Festival and during Heritage Open Days.



*The Prince Consort's Library in 1890
(before the lecture hall and reading room were added)*

Its origins date back to the establishment of Britain's first permanent training camp at Aldershot, following the reform movement championed by the Prince Consort. A strong advocate of officer training, and education generally, the Prince Consort began buying books and prints at his own expense. He personally selected the location and appointed Capt. Francis Fowke, of the Royal Engineers, as architect. Fowke had previously designed barracks, which were much admired, and had won a medal for the British Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1851. Distinguished by his use of natural light, other buildings he went on to design include a number of museums and galleries, notably the South Kensington Museum, which was to become the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Albert Hall, which he sadly did not live to see completed.

Fowke chose as his builder George Myers, who also built the Staff College at Sandhurst and a number of barracks. The work was supervised by the Royal Engineers and it was they who noticed that the walls were beginning to bulge under the weight of the roof. Fowke's solution was to shore up the walls with iron ties, which successfully support the building to this day. The Prince Consort paid for the building and took a keen interest in every aspect of design and construction, receiving quarterly progress reports.

Building began in 1859 and plans were made for it to open in 1860. A library committee was formed, who undertook to find a suitable librarian, who was to be an NCO of impeccable character, fluent in English, French and German. Three weeks before opening, Corp. Weston, of the Royal Engineers was appointed librarian. To the great embarrassment of the committee, three days later they had to withdraw the appointment when Corp. Weston was exposed as a deserter from the Inniskilling Dragoons who had re-enlisted in the Royal Engineers. He was court-martialled and sentenced to three months in prison.

Meanwhile, a new librarian needed to be found at short notice and Lt. Eustace, of the 49th Regiment of Foot stepped in for the opening, whereupon the woefully unsuitable Sgt Wellington took over to hold the fort until a permanent appointment could be made.

Following the Corp. Weston debacle, the committee once again sought nominations, particularly careful to take references. From a short list of six, they appointed Sergeant Charles Gilmore, only to discover that he was not in fact British, but a German-speaker from Strasburg, and that Charles Gilmore was not even his real name.

Gilmore, a commercial clerk, had fled conscription in his native country by sailing for New York, where he ran out of money and was unable to trace his relatives. In desperation, he signed on as a



*Interior of the Library,
virtually unchanged since its opening*

crewmember on a ship bound for England, intending to return to New York. But conditions on board were so bad that he jumped ship in England, where he joined the Army just as the Crimean War approached. It was the recruiting sergeant who turned Charles Guillemin into Charles Gilmore.

His nationality notwithstanding, Gilmore was, in most other respects eminently suitable. However, his French was weak, so he was dispatched to Jersey for three months immersion to bring it up to standard. Upon his return, in 1861, he took up his post as permanent librarian, a post his held for 30 years until his compulsory retirement from the

Army at the age of 55, whereupon he established Gilmore's School of Languages in Cargate, Aldershot.

Gilmore was married with a son at the time of his appointment, and the family lived in relative comfort in the library living quarters; most of the camp still consisted of wooden huts. A second child, a daughter called Alberta in homage to the Prince Consort, was born soon after, and the Gilmores went on to have eight children in all, with up to five of them living with their parents in the library at any one time.

Quartermaster Sergeant Franz Bex succeeded Gilmore. He was from Hanover and a gifted linguist and clerk. Like Gilmore, Bex had gone to New York. He had headed West and spent time with the Chinese building the transcontinental railroad and with Native Americans, sustaining an injury during the Nez Perce uprising. He eventually arrived in San Francisco, where he signed up as crew for a voyage around South America to France and finally to England, where he enlisted in the Devonshire Regiment and, like Gilmore, became a British subject. Bex served as librarian at the Prince Consort's Library from 1891 till 1903, until compulsorily retired at the age of 55. His 33 years in post remains the record. Unfortunately, Bex's life was to end in tragedy; a wave of anti-German feeling resulting from WWI, together with the loss of many friends on both sides, was too much for him to bear and he committed suicide by drowning in the River Wey in 1923.

Bex was succeeded by Patrick Reynolds, a retired schoolmaster (whose daughter is still alive), who served until 1941, when Lt Col Brian Dymott took over. Dymott had served in WWI and in India, and

became librarian after retirement. Largely ineffectual, he was succeeded in 1959 by Lt Col Lewis Yates, who brought a new energy to the role and was to oversee the library's centenary in 1960. Crucially, Lt Col Yates recognised his weaknesses in tasks such as cataloguing and brought in professional librarians where necessary, which made him particularly effective. Paul actually knew Lt Col Yates, whom he found to be an excellent source of stories.

From the early 1970s, the information revolution gathered pace, and the Prince Consort's Library switched its focus very much to the modern. In 1972, Mrs Joyce Sears became librarian, the first woman and the first professional librarian in the post. She retired in 1982, when Paul took the post, which he held till 1991. He moved into IT systems, at which time his former assistant, Tim Ward, took over. Tim remains the librarian today.

Having described the fascinating characters who have served as librarian, Paul then turned to events following the death of the Prince Consort in 1861. The following year, Queen Victoria asked for all the documents relating to the Prince Consort's Library. Knowing how dear the building had been to Albert, she took on the expense personally, and in 1864 she visited.

Upon Victoria's death in 1901, the new king declined to take responsibility for the upkeep of the library and the War Office wanted to close it down. But, in an extraordinary stroke of good luck, the order landed on the desk of Gen Evelyn Wood, who knew the library well and argued for its continued existence. He persuaded the WO to take it on at £60 pa.



*The Prince Consort's Library today,
with the lecture hall to the left*

Aldershot Military Society, the Think Tank of its day, used the library for lectures, which were very popular and widely reported. A lecture hall was built to the side of the Victorian library, with a reading room connecting the two buildings. Opened in 1911, the lecture hall could accommodate 450 officers.

During WWII, a projection box was built onto the front of the lecture hall in order that films could be shown. Paul was convinced that the building's original features survived beneath the projection box and lobbied to get it removed. HCC provided the funds and a specialist builder brought in. Paul was proved right, and the building was fully restored in 1993.

In 1991, the interior of the original library was restored, following extensive research to establish the original colour scheme, and the building remains almost exactly as it appears in early photographs, with the original woodwork, desks and comfortable leather chairs, all overseen by the two engravings of Victoria and Albert by Franz Winterhalter, given to the library by Queen Victoria.

In 1948, the Army Library Service was founded and, from that date, all ranks were welcome, and, moreover, not just those stationed in Aldershot.

The collection contains books dating from 1683, the rarest being the 1768 Clothing Book, the only copy known to exist. The Regimental History collection is also housed in the library, along with

important collections of prints and maps. However, while the historical collection is important and valuable, Paul was at pains to point out that today the library's purpose is modern, and that it is extremely well used, mainly online, and mostly with regard to battlefield strategy. Moreover, the royal family continues to take a keen interest.

In addition to its function as a library, the building has also served as the lodge room of the Worshipful Masters of the Army and Navy Freemasons, and as the temporary home of the Garrison Church of Scotland, while St Andrew's Church was being enlarged.

Paul's talk was based on his book *A Gift so Graciously Bestowed: The History of the Prince Consort's Library, Aldershot*. It is a fascinating story, full of bizarre twists, and Paul's telling of it was enormously informative and entertaining.