

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OAKWOOD LIBRARY.

© By Barbara Worthington

Oakwood Library must be one of the most visited buildings in Oakwood, displaying many forms of knowledge and enjoyment. This is its function today but it has had many lives.

In earlier times, a field at the corner of Oakwood Lane (then called Horseshoe Lane) and Wetherby Road was part of the estate belonging to the Nicholson family who owned Roundhay Park. When the Roundhay Estate was broken up into lots and sold off after the death of Mrs Nicholson Nicholson in 1871, it was advertised as Lot 11, just over three acres of arable land, part of 'Great Quarry Close' and described as a 'Valuable Corner Building Site'. It was sold for £1,010 to Samuel Smith, the owner of Meanwood Tanneries.

In the closing years of the century, shortly after the development of the Oakwood Parade of shops, three brothers, builders William Akeroyd Fenton and James and Joe Fenton, bought the former Lot 11 site. In January 1898, they sold the corner house they were building to Benjamin Robinson for £1,650 and he named it 'Oak Lodge'.

Benjamin Robinson did not live long after this. He died in 1902 after a long illness. His Robinson surname will be familiar to many residents of Leeds as being associated with that of Owen Robinson, the jewellers. Benjamin Robinson started in business as a pawnbroker on York Road. Eventually he owned four shops, two on York Road, one on Pontefract Lane and the fourth on Cross Green Lane. The firm merged with Owen probably in 1896. Owen also had four shops, one in each of Leeds, Hull, Oldham and Halifax. Owen Robinson is still in existence on Bond Street.

One of their best selling lines is still wedding rings.

After Benjamin Robinson's death, his widow put Oak Lodge up for sale. The sale details show the house had substantial accommodation with large rooms. On the ground floor there was the entrance hall, drawing rooms with bays, dining room, breakfast room and kitchen. There were five bedrooms with bathroom and lavatory plus three attic bedrooms and a box room. In the cellar there were keeping cellars and washing facilities. Outside there was a concrete yard, stable, coach house and a hay chamber. The house was approached from Roundhay Road by a carriageway. The total site area was described as 'nearly two thousand square yards', i.e. roughly half an acre, - less than one sixth of the original field of Lot 11 in the Nicholson sale, bought by Samuel Smith for just over a thousand pounds.

In 1904, a commercial traveller, Thomas Edward Plewman, bought the house with stables and outbuildings for £1,560. He had previously lived locally at 'Woodstock' in Jackson Avenue. Four years later, now a leather factor, he moved on, and sold the house to a Mrs Mary Helen Walker for £1,600. Her husband Mr James Longstaff Walker was a draper at 103 Kirkgate in Leeds. His firm was known as 'Reklaw' (Walker spelt backwards) and specialised in industrial clothing such as overalls, aprons and thick cotton shirts.

Initially it is not clear if the Walkers actually lived at Oak Lodge or whether it was let out to tenants for most of the time it was in their possession. Certainly the outbuildings previously used as stables were let for some years to a joiner, John William Linsey, presumably to use as a workshop since he lived at 15 Dorset Street. By 1915 however, the Electoral Roll shows that a Charles Vivien Walker was living at Oak Lodge.

During the 1932-1936 period, the house was occupied by Ernest William Powner of Powner, Dixon and Sons, engineers and iron gate manufacturers. They were in business in Rockingham Street of North Street in Leeds, an area which has been completely changed by the building of the Inner Ring Road. It is believed by the family that Powner, Dixon and Sons built the Roundhay Park gates at the Prince's Avenue entrance, now very recently renovated in the Park restoration work.

The Powner family must have enjoyed living at Oak Lodge. They employed several servants, a nanny for the children, a gardener and probably two live-in staff to look after the family. One of the family remembers looking from the stair balcony at the guests coming to the house. She also remembers a traumatic occasion when her sister required her tonsils removing. The operation was successfully carried out on the kitchen table by Dr MacVean, who at that time lived just across the road. It is interesting to speculate if Mr Powner was responsible for the wrought iron sign that still stands in the garden of Dr MacVean's former home and possibly the lamp standards that are in the Library grounds. The Powner family moved to 208 Oakwood Lane probably in late 1936.

In 1937, the residents of Oak Lodge would have had a good view of a very colourful and unique event. This was the occasion when King George V and Queen Mary on their way to the grand opening of the Civic Hall stopped briefly at the old lodge at the end of Park Avenue where they transferred from their car to an open-topped Landau for the rest of their journey into Leeds. Thousands of people gathered at Oakwood to see them and it is known that the people with flats over the shops invited friends and neighbours to come and enjoy the spectacle.

During the later part of the 30s many people found the cost of buying books rather high, so many small private libraries came into being. I can remember being a member of Boots Library and when on holiday it was a boon to be able to pay a small amount and be able to use their extensive libraries. I also remember another smaller private library called The Silver Library which had a limited number of books which could be borrowed on payment of a small fee. Oakwood also had a small library situated on the parade and organised by Mrs Annie Smiddy. She later moved to the other side of the road and started a haberdasher's shop.

When Mrs Walker died in 1951, the house passed to her grandson, solicitor James Derek Walker and not long afterwards, to her daughter Mrs Olive Whittaker who later sold it to the Leeds Corporation for £4,000 in 1953. The house was opened as a Branch Library in February 1953.

Part of the Library building was used as a Police Station until 1961. Our more observant readers will be able to see where the familiar Blue Lamp was situated outside on the wall. There had been a Police Station in the area for decades before, starting at 190 Wetherby Road and it was eventually transferred to the Park Avenue Lodge for a time.

In 1961, the Library was extended into the house next door, No. 2 Wetherby Road, known as the Bolton House at the time. This too has an interesting history having been lived in by one of the four Jacomelli brothers who ran a very successful restaurant business for many years on Boar Lane. Even today you can admire the plaster work and original windows. It is not too difficult to imagine it as a private house. There are still cellars under the building with

original hooks in the ceiling probably used for hanging hams on by the cook of the house.

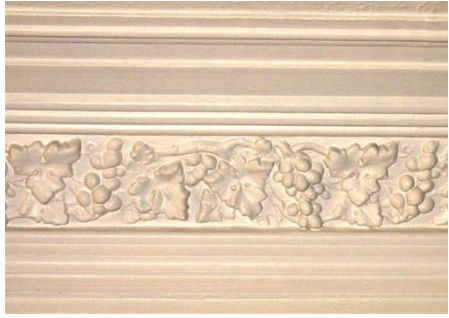
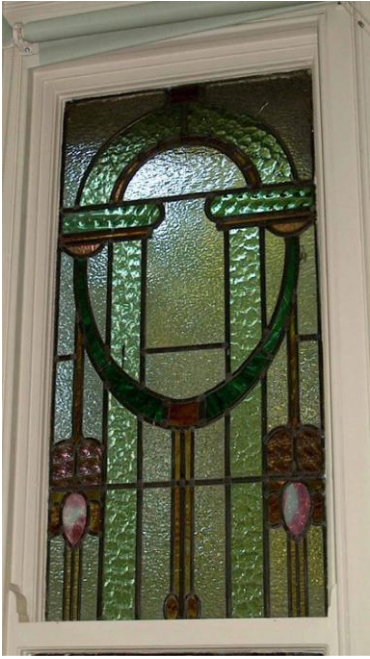
The access to the Library was much improved in 1986 with the construction of a ramp, much appreciated by mothers with children and those with walking difficulties.

In May 1999, the Yorkshire Post reported on the opening of the re-furnished Oakwood Library, featuring two new computers. Guests included Councillor Bernard Atha and Fabian Hamilton MP. The variety of books on all subjects from picture books for the youngest visitor to large-type books for those who have difficulty with small print, is amazing.

The function of the Library has changed considerably over the years. Many people now enjoy listening to talks and other social events organised by the Library staff. It is a joy, too, to see the faces of the young children listening at story time. The original owners of the houses would be astonished to see people of all ages using computers and communicating with people all over the world and children using computers to help them with their homework. You can even book seats at the theatre in the Library and view plans for local planning applications.

The two old houses really have become a major focal point in local social and educational activities. The staff are very pleasant and a considerable asset to the Library. It is a well used place and long may it continue to serve the local people.

I am indebted to the staff at the Oakwood Library, the Leeds Central Library and the Yorkshire Archives Service at Sheepscar.



Features inside Oakwood Library (above) and view of the ironwork in Dr. MacVean's garden (below).