

Forage Friday: Reading Habits

Friday 12 June 2020

Welcome to Forage Friday: Reading Habits - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

In April, [The Reading Agency published their annual findings on the nation's reading habits](#), and it seems that during lockdown we have increased our reading by 31% – in hardback, digital and audio forms. In particular, there was a spike among young people (18-24) where almost half (45%) were reading more than before lockdown. Reading has been shown to impact [positively on people's wellbeing](#), and this new report found that during lockdown reading has helped alleviate stress and anxiety during these uncertain times.

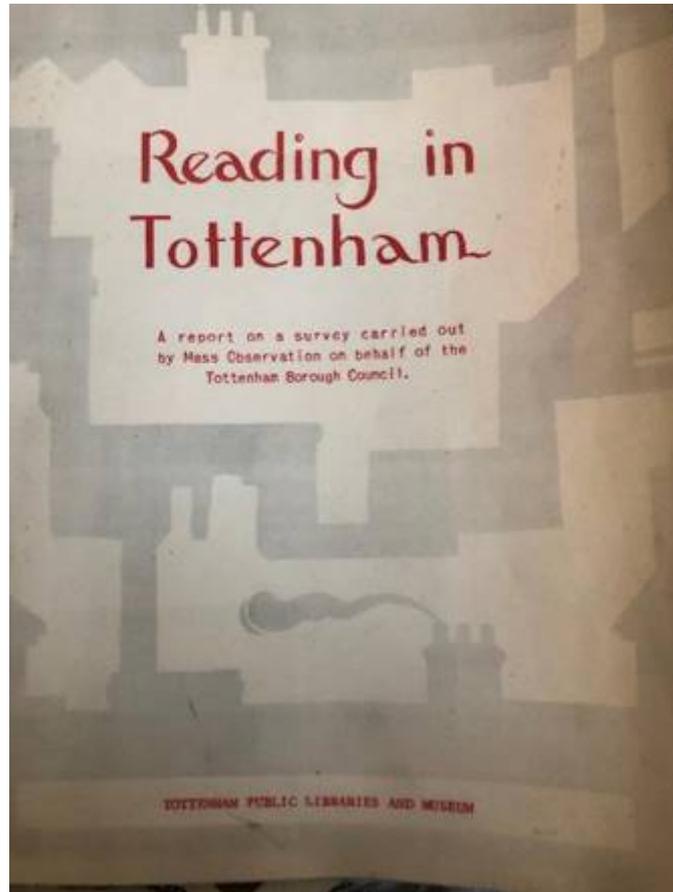
Our libraries have been closed during the lockdown of course, but the service has been able to increase its online capacity and open up new streams of [online material for people to access and borrow](#) during these times. This includes access to online learning and reference material such as the Oxford Reference series, magazines and newspapers.



Coombes Croft Library, Tottenham, 1954

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Following on from the Reading Agency's findings we're going to look at people's reading habits from 1946, when a landmark survey *Reading in Tottenham* was done by A W McClellan, the Director of Tottenham Public Libraries and Museum. As the report's cover (below) says, it was 'A report on a survey carried out by Mass Observation on behalf of the Tottenham Borough Council', and it was the first time such an in-depth report about library users' reading habits had been conducted in the UK.



Cover of the report *Reading in Tottenham*, published and released publicly in 1952.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Archibald William McClellan (1908-1985) was a librarian, author and lecturer. He was one of the most progressive librarians of his time, who developed and applied modern management techniques to the running of libraries. McClellan was born in London 1908 and went to school in Tottenham. He joined Tottenham Public Library as a junior assistant and progressed rapidly in his career, working at Poplar, Penge and Chelmsford Libraries. After the Second World War, McClellan returned to Tottenham as Director of Libraries and Museums for the borough in 1945.



Mr McClellan with the writer and reformer, [Vera Brittain](#) in Tottenham Library, November 1949

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

In 1946, with the assistance of the [Mass Observation](#) organisation, McClellan undertook a full-scale survey of peoples' reading habits at Tottenham Library. The findings from the report, *Reading in Tottenham*, determined the future development of the library service in Tottenham and the influenced wider library sector. From here he developed his pioneering approach called Service in Depth which was widely known as the 'Tottenham Experiment'.

He remained at Tottenham until 1965, when he accepted a research position at the College of Librarianship Wales in Aberystwyth, and where he remained until retiring in 1975. He wrote the book *The Reader, the Library and the Book* (1973), and his papers and lectures were eventually published as *The Logistics of a Public Library Bookstock* (1978), and his archives are held at the [University of Aberystwyth Archives](#).

His son, Keith, who was a teacher and now a writer, wrote a [biography about his father](#) in 2017.

Public Library Pioneer



A. W. McClellan



By Keith McClellan

In a letter to [The Guardian in June 2018](#), Keith discussed the legacy of his father's work and the importance of libraries today more than ever. He wrote of how his father was an advocate of free access to books and learning resources for all, in "every field of knowledge, expressing every point of view".

So, what did the Reading Survey tell us about the reading habits of Tottenham residents in 1946? Firstly, reading came in as the third most popular leisure activity (behind sports activities and gardening). McClellan actually seemed a little disappointed in that, but today I think we would be very impressed with that result, considering how many other things we have to keep us busy.

Other findings show that reading and visiting libraries was more popular with the 'middle classes' and less so with the 'skilled and unskilled working classes' (using the terminology of the report of that time, which focussed on the class structure of society, rather than a socio-economic emphasis that is usually considered in surveys today).

And what were people reading then? Well, just over 50% of the 1000 adults surveyed regularly read books, and around 90% read newspapers – both the daily and the Sunday editions.

"By far the most popular is the *News of the World* which is read by three people in every five (that is, about twice as many as read the *Mirror* on weekdays). More people read the *News of the World* than regularly read books at all. (61% and 53% respectively)."

People also read local newspapers weekly “to get their local news”. In Tottenham at that time they would have been reading the *Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald*.

“This paper is read by two people in every five, but about a tenth of the non-readers said they would read it if they could obtain copies. It is read most frequently among the older men of the skilled artisan class.”

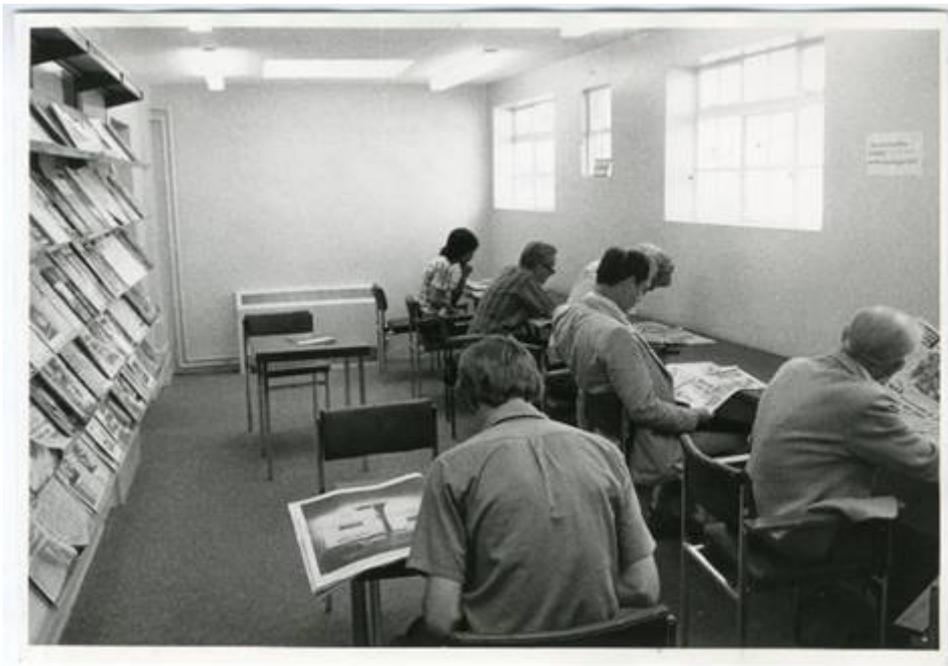
We have the *Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* and a number of other local papers from around the borough, such as the *Wood Green & Southgate Weekly Herald* or the *Hornsey Journal*, available for people to [read on microfilm](#) in the Search Room (when we are open, of course!). They are one of the most popular sources for research about the area and social history, telling us so much about what was happening locally from community activities, incidents, crimes, celebrations, who was playing at local music halls, what was on in the cinema and, of course, the football results.

This consumption of newspapers in the 1940s and 50s differs greatly compared to how people access news today. Again, the media we use to gain our information from is dramatically different and varied compared to when McClellan conducted his survey. This [Ofcom survey from 2018](#) states that circulation of national newspaper titles (in both digital and hardcopy medium) has decreased 52.5% from 2010. It is fair to say that McClellan would not recognise most of the ways we digest our news today.

Newspaper Reading Rooms were always a very busy space of any library, and the photographs below show some of the borough’s library reading rooms.



Newspaper reading room at St. Ann's Branch library, 5 August 1931
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



Muswell Hill Library reading room 1977
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



You can just see some readers behind this gentleman reading his book who are enjoying their daily read of a newspaper at Wood Green Library in 1986.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Newspapers are still a popular resource in libraries today, accessed by many and while the libraries are closed as mentioned above, you can to access them online through the 'PressReader' available through the [library service's website here](#).

[The Mass Observation Archive](#) still collects people's stories and material about everyday life in Britain. It contains papers generated by the original Mass Observation social research organisation (1937 to early 1950s) which worked with McClellan on his *Reading in Tottenham* report, and has newer material collected continuously since 1981 through the Mass Observation Project. The Archive is held at [The Keep](#) as part of the University of Sussex's Special Collections.

The Mobile Library Service was also another service that was developed by McClellan. These wonderful photographs below from 1955 show Tottenham students and adults waiting to get into the mobile library to stock up on their reading material.



Boys reading at the entrance of the Mobile Library, 1955
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



Girls outside the Mobile Library Service in Tottenham, 1955
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



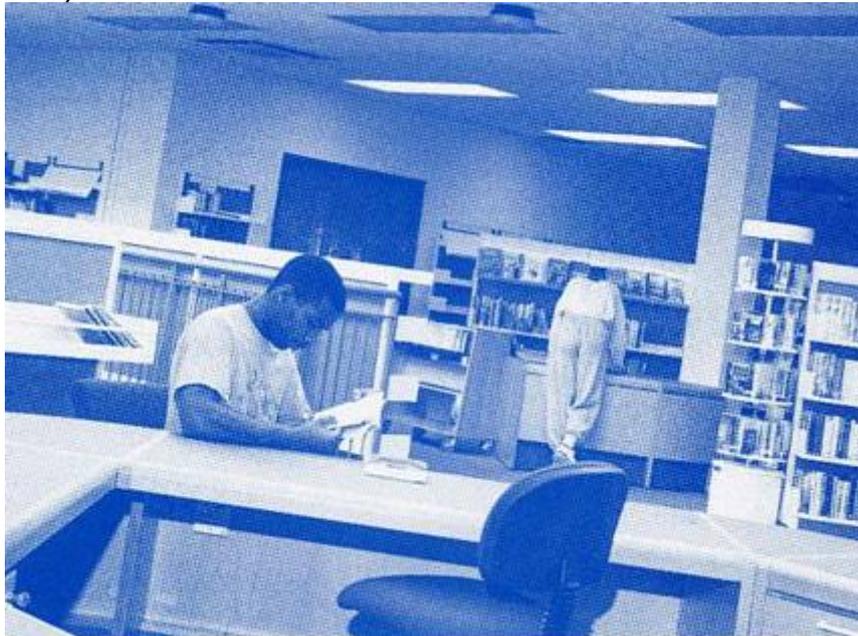
Teenagers queuing for the Mobile Library Service in Tottenham, 1955
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



Queuing for the Mobile Library Service in Tottenham, 1955

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Whilst libraries are not open at the moment, here's a couple of familiar views from the more recent past showing Marcus Garvey Library on a library leaflet, of the early 1990s (below).



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

And below is a photograph of Wood Green Library, showing the welcome desk to Haringey Libraries c.2008. The word 'book' has been written in as many different languages as possible, reflecting Haringey's diverse communities. It was created by artist Nicola Green with the local community through silk-printing workshops. You can read all about it [here](#).



© The artist: Nicola Green

As it's Friday, we will leave you with this cartoon, drawn by one of the library staff having a bit of fun in one of the library staff newsletters from c.1950. We hold an amazing series of these newsletters in the Library Service's archives at Bruce Castle. They produced them on a Gestetner copying machine of course!



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
 Enjoy your weekend and happy reading from us all at Bruce Castle.

Take care, keep those social distances and keep well
 Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

Julie Melrose
 Archivist

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

Haringey Council, Haringey Archive and Museum Service, Bruce Castle Museum, Lordship Lane, London N17
8NU