

Local Democracy then and Now

Local Government outline – mostly on legislation

1.1 Before 1800 - General

There was no democracy in England but there was a fledgling system of local government which by the early 20th century had become a democracy.

In the early middle ages national power was held by the king. Local government in Cheshire was via the Earl of Cheshire as overlord and the various manors within the county were under him. Those manors included Bramhall.

This had evolved by Tudor times to national power being held by monarch and Parliament and local government being organised such that the top layer was the counties with a Lord Lieutenant and Justices of the Peace and the bottom layer was the parishes.

The Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire through until the 20th century was nearly always an earl (just occasionally a duke or a Marquess) and the JPs were drawn from the gentry ranks. There was a property qualification to be met before one could put oneself forward as a potential JP, but the limiting factor was then the existing JPs had to invite the potential newcomer to join and they made sure that only the “right sort” of people were invited.

In the parishes the main area of civil responsibility was the administering the Poor Laws – the first Poor Law Act was in 1601 near the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and that was followed by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1662 (early in the reign of King Charles II).

The 1601 Act gave responsibilities to the parishes, but the 1662 Act recognised that in the north of England parishes were often very large in area and it had been more convenient for local supervision and decision-making as regards church administration to divide them into sub-areas which were called townships, so the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1662 said that if the parish already operated with townships then it could operate the civil legislation on a township basis.

The Poor Law legislation then applied to a township as if it was a parish – so it had its own poor law overseers, its own waywarden (also called surveyor of the highways) and its own parish constable.

1.2 Bramhall in the early 1800s

Bramhall was not a parish, but a township of the parish of St Mary's, Stockport. The parish of Stockport possibly started small originally and later grew in early medieval times as Stockport became a barony and a market town, but by the mid 1200s it comprised the area of 14 local manors which then were the townships of Stockport for church administration purposes and Bramhall was one of them. Hence the Bramhall township of the early 1800s probably had the same boundaries as the medieval manor of Bramhall.

The boundaries of Bramhall were similar to the current day SK7 boundaries to the south and the west but to the north it went across current day Davenport just north of the station and to the east it followed the current day A6 (the boundary was in the middle of the road) from the Kennerley Road junction to just south of where Hazel Grove station is now. This made the township considerably larger than the area now regarded as Bramhall (defined either by postal address or by local government wards). The majority of the population lived in the east

next to or near to the London Road (in 1841 over 700 people lived by the London Road, 224 in Woodsmoor, Bramhall Moor and other places no longer Bramhall and 429 in the area of current day Bramhall).

The township had its own elected officers and raised money by rates on the township to look after the poor of Bramhall township, to maintain the highways of Bramhall township and to pay the expenses of the constable of Bramhall township. However “elected” operated rather differently – for example the overseers of the poor were to be “substantial householders” and each year, following a vestry meeting, a list of who was prepared to stand for the following year was prepared and voted on and the 5 or 6 names who got the most ratepayer votes would be submitted to the local JPs who selected which 2 were to be the overseers for the following year. This system tended to operate with the same small group of larger farmers and tradesmen (in Bramhall) filling the posts in rotation. The waywarden and the constable were elected by the ratepayers without the JPs' involvement

The manor of Bramhall still had its own areas of responsibility mostly connected to land and tenants.

1.3 The township/parish ratepayers and voters up to 1819

The people who were being taxed by the vestry were the ratepayers and they were people who had an interest in the land/property of the parish, either by owning land and/or buildings or by renting them. The ratepayers were the voters in annual elections or in vestry meetings. Each property in the township had its designated ratepayer and if, say, a house was inhabited by a married couple and their children then the husband was naturally head of the family and was either the owner or the tenant and hence the ratepayer and the voter.

If however, a household was headed up by a widow or a single woman then she was the ratepayer and also the voter. Therefore, although no woman could vote in general elections, she could, if a ratepayer, vote in local elections.

There had been a couple of legal challenges in the 18th century maintaining that women could not be voters in any circumstances, but the outcomes were the same namely that the challengers were wrong and women were not in common law debarred from voting by reason of their sex. Similarly, in theory women could hold a parish office such as overseer of the poor or sexton etc, but they were very rarely elected.

Policies in parish politics could be decided at vestry meetings where any ratepayer could attend and decisions were taken by a show of hands.

1.4 The parish/township voters after 1819

Following the Sturges-Bourne Act of 1818, the concept of one ratepayer = one vote was overturned. Ratepayers whose property had a rateable value of under £50 still had a vote, but those with a value between £50 and £75 had 2 votes and so on in steps of £25 until those with a rateable value of over £150 had 6 votes, which was the maximum.

The effect in Bramhall was that the substantial farmers and tradesmen ended up with more than one vote, but by far the greater number of ratepayers had just the one vote. This legislation might have been an attempt to keep the lower classes down or it might just have been based on the premise that the greater the ratepayer's financial interest in the property of township the higher the rates he paid and therefore the more say he ought to have in how they were spent.

This voting system was broadly the one that existed through until the 1894 Local Government

Act when it went back to one ratepayer = 1 vote.

The 1818 Act also brought in the requirement for parish vestries to record minutes of meetings and keep them. Also the vestry could create government by “select vestry” such that decisions were taken in meetings of the parish officers and those meetings were not open to all the ratepayers.

Bramhall from 1834 to 1928

2.1 Loss of main responsibility

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 took away local control of the poor laws and created poor law unions which were formed from a conglomeration of parishes or townships.

The Stockport Poor Law Union was formed from 16 local townships, including Bramhall. The poor law townships overlapped with but were not the same as the Stockport parish townships. The Union was run by elected Poor Law Guardians, each township electing one guardian.

A township still had to have overseers of the poor, but their duties were, inter alia, to maintain the poor law rating records for the township and collect the rates. They were not able to make policy decisions but could make recommendations to the guardians about individual cases of need in the township.

Could a woman be elected as a poor law guardian? There was no reason in law why she could not but it was 1875 before anyone was in the whole of England.

The result of the Poor Law Amendment Act was to take away from the townships and parishes the most important area of which they previously had local control.

2.2.1 1840s through to 1893

As the century progressed central government produced many more Acts of Parliament sometimes giving wider permissive powers to parishes/townships and also setting up new bodies to be in a higher layer between national government and parish. One example of this is the sanitary districts set up in the 1870s (see section 2.2.2 below) another is the formation of the county councils in 1888 (see 2.2.3 below)

2.2.2 Sanitary districts

The townships in the Stockport Poor Law Union fell mainly into two new sanitary districts: those townships which were within the Stockport municipal borough were part of the Stockport Urban Sanitary District and all the remaining townships to the south of the borough fell into the Stockport Rural Sanitary district. Bramhall and seven others were in this rural district.

Sanitary districts under the 1875 Public Health Act had responsibility for ensuring an adequate and clean water supply and adequate sewage systems. They had power to deal with “nuisances” (which usually meant sewage-based pollution). New building plans had to be approved by the sanitary district before work could start and the building work could be inspected when it was in progress.

The district also had to appoint a medical officer who looked into and reported on outbreaks of disease and on mortality statistics.

2.2.3 1888 Local Government Act

This was the act that created elected county councils replacing the role of the JPs as the local government layer above the parishes and the sanitary authorities.

This left a township such as Bramhall with a small group of officials of its own with county councils as the next layer above but there were also poor law unions and sanitary districts and highway boards adding more layers of complexity.

Large towns within a county (Chester, Birkenhead and Stockport within Cheshire) were redefined as “county boroughs” by the 1888 Act and they did not come under the county council but had all the county council powers themselves.

The electors for the county council were all adult residents of Cheshire who were ratepayers in respect of property worth over £10 a year. For Bramhall this meant that, for example, none of the occupiers of the cottages at Pownhall Green or at Benja Fold could vote because their property was not worth enough whereas Mary Ann Leigh who lived in a large house on Bramhall Lane (near where the war memorial is now) was able to vote.

2.3 1894 Local Government Act

This act in part was concerned with consolidating, reforming and putting in statute law what had been in common law and completing the split between ecclesiastical matters and civil matters. Just looking at how this affected Bramhall:

- Multiple votes were abolished – it was back to one ratepayer = one vote
- Bramhall township became a “Rural Civil Parish” for local government purposes and no longer had any church responsibilities. It had a council which was to be elected annually with a chairman and between 5 and 15 councillors (the number to be determined by the county council)
- Immediately above it in the hierarchy on sanitary matters was the Rural District which replaced the rural sanitary district and it had a council elected every three years
- Over the districts came the county council
- It was written into statute law that women could be poor law guardians or members of a school board and could vote in local elections if they had the proper property qualifications whether they be single, widowed or married. It was not until 1907 until women were given the right to stand for election in all forms of local government

The Stockport Rural District that Bramhall now belonged to contained the civil parishes of Bosden, Bramhall, Brinnington, Compstall, Handforth, Norbury, Offerton and Torkington

2.4 Bramhall and others form Hazel Grove cum Bramhall UDC in 1900

By 1896 Bramhall was becoming unhappy with being part of Stockport Rural District and made some enquiry about becoming an Urban District in its own right, but nothing came of this. However, by 1900 the Hazel Grove-cum-Bramhall Urban District had been formed from Bosden, Bramhall, Norbury, Offerton and Torkington, leaving the Stockport rural district area in a very depleted state.

In 1899 Stockport Borough had been trying to take over various local civil parishes including the 5 which banded together, so in part, the formation of Hazel Grove and Bramhall Urban District was a way of fighting off Stockport. Bramhall did not completely win this fight because it lost Davenport and Woodsmoor to Stockport in 1901.

An urban district had more powers and more funding than a rural district (and much more than a rural civil parish) and, as a district, its council was directly responsible to the county council without any intervening layer.

2.5 Voting rights become similar to those for general elections – 1918

All adult men and all women over 30 (with some caveats) who had lived in the parish for more

than 12 months and who had been enrolled onto the electoral register.

2.6 Voting rights become the same as those for general elections - 1928

All adult men and adult women who met the residence and electoral roll requirements.

3. Education – the coming of the local authority school

Prior to 1870 local authorities had no interest in education (other than to provide schooling in workhouses). Schools that existed were either run by private enterprise or by charitable trusts.

Bramhall had very little in the way of school provision. There had been some small schools in the 18th century (one at Bramhall Green and perhaps one at Benja Fold), but by the 1842 tithe map and the 1841-1861 censuses, there is no hint of any school in Bramhall

In 1870 Forster's Elementary Education Act was passed. Local authorities had to assess their area and ensure that there were sufficient elementary school places available for all the children between 5 and 12. If there were not, then a school or schools had to be built and run by the local authority with the costs being met from the poor rate.

Step 1: For townships it was the responsibility of their overseers of the poor initially to fill in certain returns on school place provision in their areas and send them back to the Department for Education in London.

Step 2: the Department also made its own investigations and after drawing its conclusions had to publish a notice as to the amount and description of further school accommodation required

Step 3: if the township was notified that a school was required then it had one month in which to appeal and ask for a public enquiry

Step 4: If no appeal was received the Department would issue a "final notice" telling the district to get on with the work and might give more detailed instructions as to the work required.

If after 6 months the township had not got things under way, the Department issued a "requisition" which forced the formation of a school board.

It is difficult to reconstruct the timeline of what happened in Bramhall. The initial returns had to be submitted to the Department of Education by 31 December 1870 if the local authority wished to be eligible for a grant for any building work, but it was permissible for the information to be submitted later (but no grant would be available).

It was only in 1874 that the local press start reporting the turmoil in Bramhall on the township discovering that it was required to build a school at Pownall Green and had been labelled a defaulter for not meeting any deadlines.

The township officials and ratepayers were horrified at the thought of the costs of providing and running a school. There was a ratepayers meeting on 13 May 1874 followed by another two in July with tempers rather frayed and criticisms flying about.

On 4 August 1874 the overseers sent a petition signed by 400 residents to London (published in the local press) explaining that although Bramhall itself had no schools there were schools in Norbury, Cheadle Hulme, Woodford and Stockport so that no child was more than 3 miles from a school so there should be no need to build a school in Bramhall The reply from the Department of Education was short and to the point:

“Sir – I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 4th inst. enclosing a petition, but I am to inform you that my lords have no power to modify the final notice”

So that is how a school came to be built at Pownall Green. It opened in 1877, was extended in 1898 and then in 1902 responsibility for schools and education was moved to County Councils.

4 Utilities come to Bramhall

4.1 Bramhall and gas

There is no clear document trail on how and when gas came to Bramhall. It is clear that by the end of the 19th century gas was being supplied to Bramhall by Stockport Municipal Council, the town owning a gas works at Portwood, but when did it first arrive?

In 1820 a private company was set up by some local businessmen in Stockport to produce and sell coal gas. Certain of the larger mills were already operating gas lighting from their own gas-making equipment, but the new company found willing customers and the town council even had a few street lights erected and connected to the new company's supply. By the 1830s the gas company had expanded, was now a company incorporated by act of parliament and was highly profitable.

Although Stockport corporation negotiated a reduction in the gas price they were charged by the company, they really wanted to follow Manchester's example and buy out the company which would enable them to apply the gas profits to improvements in the town. In 1837 Stockport got a private act of parliament giving them the powers both to buy the company and to operate it and sell gas and finally, in 1839, the buyout was completed, the council paying £21,493.

In 1849 Stockport had 1,530 private gas customers whereas by 1889 it had over 15,000. Were these all within the boundaries of Stockport Borough? The population of the town in 1891 was 114,000 so there were certainly houses and commercial premises enough.

Turning to Bramhall, in *Bygone Bramhall* (by Barbara Dean) there is a photograph of Bramall Hall showing gas lamps on its drive and the photograph is said to date from the 1870s. Also when the Methodist Church was opened in 1871 a newspaper report said that the church was lighted by gas. It is perfectly possible that both the hall and the chapel had invested in a gas making plant; they were quite widely advertised in the 1860s and 70s with small ones being able to generate enough gas for 10 lamps, so it does not mean that gas mains had reached Bramhall by then

In 1880 and 1881 the Freeholders Company was advertising for sale some of the (very few) large houses that they built at Bramall Park and the houses are said to have water, gas and sewerage.

From 1889 newspaper adverts of larger houses for sale frequently mention that they have gas. One example is all the houses built by William Adkinson between Ladythorn Road and Bramhall station in the mid/late 1890s.

Gas must have reached eastern Bramhall by 1891 because on 14 November of that year there was a meeting of ratepayers held at the Christian Bethel Church to debate their demands that “we as a meeting ask the Rural Sanitary Authority to light the whole of the sanitary area”. By the end of the meeting there had been an amendment to the earlier resolution which became “for the time being the main road only to be lighted”. The amendment

was passed by 25 votes to 6. The “main road” referred to of course was the London Road in Hazel Grove.

Finally in 1898 and 1899 Bramhall Parish Council has a small number of gas street lamps erected on Bramhall Lane near the Woodford Road junction.

4.2 Bramhall and water

Bramhall is a wet area and was very well provided with wells and pumps as shown on the 1872 and later ordnance survey maps. The Stockport Rural Sanitary Authority from 1872 had a duty to ensure that the townships within its area had an adequate and clean water supply – it did not have to ensure there was a piped water supply.

There was in Stockport the Stockport District Water Company, a private company formed by the amalgamation of two other water companies in the 1860s. Stockport Municipal Borough got an Act of Parliament in 1863 giving it the powers to buy out the water company, but did not actually buy it until 1899 when it cost about £800,000 to do so.

This means that there was no municipal supply of water for Bramhall to hook into, but piped water did arrive in a rather piecemeal fashion.

As mentioned in the gas section piped water was available in Bramall Park's new houses from 1880, so the water mains had reached that far. Then in about 1889 there was a survey carried out in Ack Lane and Bramhall Lane South as to who wanted to get piped water. Most did but a few did not.

4.3 Bramhall and sewerage

Without sewers how did people dispose of effluent?

- They could dig a deep hole in the garden and position the privy over it. When the hole was full, dig a new one and move the privy;
- They could create a midden heap and pile the stuff up
- They could have a cesspit built under their cellar and have their indoor loos discharging into it (In 1850 Windsor Castle had 53 cesspits in its cellars);
- They could pay people to take it away;
- They could discharge it into a stream

Some of these methods worked satisfactorily in a sparsely populated area, but the more built up an area became the more of a problem sewage disposal became.

Bramhall had no sewers before the late 1870s. However, when the Freeholders Company started to build the Bramall Park estate 1879/80, they put in a sewerage system whereby the houses they built were connected to a main sewer that ran down to precipitation tanks in the Ladybrook Valley.

The most densely populated part of Bramhall at that time was along the London Road (now the A6) at Hazel Grove. It was therefore logical that it was the place most in need of sewerage. Therefore Bramhall township council asked the Rural Sanitary Authority for approval for sewerage of the London Road locality and for the work to be carried out. In March 1881 Rural Authority asked for tenders, the job was carried out and Bramhall would have paid over the money to the Sanitary Authority. During the course of all this there were protests from rate payers in Bramhall who did not live in the Hazel Grove area – they did not see why they had to pay for something that did not benefit them.

Fifteen years later Bramhall, is now a rural civil parish within a rural district and seems to have

been organised into 3 wards (north, south and east). The east ward was over to Hazel Grove and covered by that drainage area but there were no sewers for the north and south wards of Bramhall (covering the west side of Bramhall from Davenport down to the southern boundary).

One method of sewage disposal in south Bramhall in 1899 would appear to be by discharge into a stream. In 1899 the County Council received a complaint from Bramhall about state of several brooks which the council's Medical Officer of Health then investigated. and the county council then wrote to the Stockport Rural District Council . The medical officer had found that *"the brook which creates the most nuisance is known as the Carr Brook into which the pollution of about 200 houses appears to have overflow pipes"*. In Benja Fold the brook was *"exceedingly foul"* and at the back of the Wesleyan schools there was also *"considerable evidence of pollution"* He explained that at that point the brook was joined by *"another brook containing sewage which runs through Kitt's Moss"*

The medical officer thought that *"the brooks should not be permitted to remain in their present condition, as they are injurious to health"* and the district council was ordered to clean the brooks thoroughly and *"the offensive mud drawn thereout should in every instance be forthwith removed"*

At their September 1899 meeting the district council recorded that the brooks were being cleaned and that the nuisance would be obviated when the sewage works were completed. So what were these sewage works referred to? In September 1899 the saga of the sewerage of western Bramhall was half way through its 6 year marathon as follows:

In late 1895 or early 1896 the Bramhall parish council had asked the District Council for a sewage scheme for the unsewered parts of Bramhall and a scheme had been put forward by the rural district council that would cost £20,000. Bramhall council had come up with their alternative scheme prepared by a sanitary engineer from Manchester and a parish meeting was held of Bramhall ratepayers on 30 March 1896 to put forward the parish council's preferred scheme (which was costed at just over £12,000).

Under this scheme, the undrained parts of the north and south ward were to be spilt into 3 areas. Each would have a sewer network and an outlet point where the raw sewage would be used to irrigate areas of farmland. For the Bramhall Moor area the farmland would be part of Newhouse farm; for the northern area the farmland would be 600 years behind the Jolly Sailor pub and for the southern area the sewage would be spread over field behind Damery farm. This sort of scheme can work in a predominately rural area but it does not appear to be the best option for an area such as Bramhall which from the mid 1890s was being rapidly build up.

However, the parish council scheme was enthusiastically endorsed by the parish meeting, but the rural district council imposed its own scheme.

On 21 February 1898 a Parochial Committee was formed to supervise the carrying out of the sewerage scheme for the contributory place of Bramhall. There were 5 councillors from the rural district council and 3 from the Bramhall Parish Council (Messrs Addyman, Pownall and Smith). *"Mr Addyman desired it to be recorded that the contract for the scheme was let before this committee was formed and that representatives of the parish council were not consulted"*

Things did not go well. The work went over time and 100% over budget. The contractor laying the pipes in the northern area did it badly with, for example, resulting subsidence of Bramhall Lane outside Clarke's Farm from sewer collapse because the sewers were too shallowly laid. Also in Woodsmoor Lane there was also subsidence over the line of the sewers and sewage pollution seeping from the pipes.

The contractor for the southern area had rather fewer problems but did have to pay for repairs to a broken water main in Kitt's Moss Lane and a broken gas main on Moss Lane.

In October 1900 the creation of Hazel Grove cum Bramhall Urban District was confirmed, so Bramhall now was part of an urban district and still the sewage scheme plodded on.

In September 1901 the Hazel Grove cum Bramhall UDC voted to abandon the old scheme in favour of a modified scheme, which would have a sewage works based on the bacteria system rather than the precipitation system as per the old scheme. In a meeting a councillor said "in 1897 when the scheme was begun the sanitary condition of the district was bad, but with the increase of building, matters had become worse".

In May 1902 there was an advertisement in the Alderley Edge and Wilmslow Advertiser for the sale of 46 building plots around the newly constructed streets of Ogden Road, Lees Road and Sydall Road. The advert states that water and gas will be laid on and that it is "expected" that the sewage scheme will be completed by the autumn.

There does not seem to be any further mention of the sewage scheme in the press so presumably, after some 6 or 7 years from start to finish there was a satisfactory outcome with the system (although probably not with the cost).

Ordnance survey maps from 1909 to 1935 show the Bramhall Sewage Works as being in the Ladybrook valley near Tenement Lane.

4.4 Bramhall and electricity

This is the final utility to reach Bramhall.

Stockport council had invested early in electricity technology and formed its own electricity generating company in 1901. It used the output to electrify the tram system and replace the old horse-drawn trams but was also able to sell the surplus production to private customers.

In the 19th century, if a local authority wanted to do something which was not covered by the powers that it had, it had to obtain a private Act of Parliament to be given the necessary powers. In the late 19th century the government could see that more and more local authorities would be wanting to do things with electricity so for administrative ease they passed a series of Acts between 1882 and 1909 with the result that a local authority no longer had to apply for its own Act of Parliament but merely had to apply for an order from the Board of Trade.

Hazel Grove cum Bramhall UDC got its provisional order from the Board of Trade in late 1913. At a meeting in March 1914 of the Bramhall Ratepayers Association a representative from the council explained that initially the council intended to provide electricity to Bramhall Lane, Woodford Road and the Sydall Estate and they would shortly be conducting a survey to see how many residents wanted to get electricity ; they needed a certain level of interest to make the project worthwhile.

Nothing more is heard about electricity for Bramhall until 1923. Two possible explanations being that perhaps not enough residents wanted electricity or else by the time the survey had been conducted and before any action could be taken, the First World War intervened.

In February 1923 Bramall Park residents were exploring the possibility of getting electricity from Cheadle and Gatley UDC, but Hazel Grove cum Bramhall UDC objected because they are about to start their own electricity scheme.

By April 1923 the Bramhall Ratepayers Association notes that footpaths are being disturbed for the electricity cables.

In July 1923 HG & B UDC ask the Electricity Commissioners to sanction the UDC arranging a loan for £40,000 in order to electrify Bramhall.

In October 1923 tenders are invited for the erection of an electricity sub-station in Bramhall (it was to be just off Fir Road).

Throughout the period from April 1923 various advertisements of houses for sale in Bramhall have included in the description "wired for electric light" without making it clear that there were no mains completed for the wiring to be connected to and this had given rise to complaints.

Finally, on 10 September 1924 "Many residents in Bramhall where the electrical fittings and the connections to cables had been completed were for the first time installed with electric light on Wednesday night. Hazel Grove and Bramhall Urban council is pushing on with the inspection and the contractors with the connections".

All the utilities were nationalised in 1948 and then privatised in the 1980s and 1990s.

5. Bramhall and a recreation ground (just in passing)

By 1913 Bramhall was getting fairly populous and there were all sorts of local societies. There was, for example the Bramhall Tradesmen's Association representing local businesses (mostly shops) and there was the Bramhall Ratepayers' Association which kept an eye on what was going on in Bramhall because the association wanted to preserve the beauty of their village community but also wanted to promote the provision of facilities for the population so long as they would not ruin the ethos of the place.

In 1913 or 1914 the Tradesmen approached the Ratepayers and asked that they should "co-operate with them to get a field where children could play instead of congregating in the streets"

In March 1914 councillor Hewitt at a Ratepayers Association meeting reported that a deputation of the tradesmen had approached the council but the Hazel Grove members thought that all Bramhall people were wealthy and had large gardens so they did not need a playing field. This perhaps was councillor Hewitt just being humourous because by October 1914 the Council were approving the rental on an annual tenancy of 4 acres of land of Lumb Lane at £3 per acre to provide a recreation ground and the council and would erect suitable fencing at a cost of about £35.

6. Library

The Public Libraries Act of 1850 gave powers to municipal boroughs with a population in excess of 10,000 to build and run public libraries. Initially there was a slow take up of the act's provisions but by the 1880s private philanthropy had come on board and many libraries were built with funds provided by such people as Henry Tate (Liverpool sugar merchant of Tate Gallery fame), John Passmore Edwards, a newspaper owner who built 15 libraries in his native Cornwall as well as others elsewhere and, above all, the Scottish/American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie who endowed libraries firstly in Scotland and America and, from 1904 in England.

In 1913 Carnegie set up the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust which had the aim of improving the well-being of the working classes and included the endowment of local free libraries in its remit. Stockport Central Library built in 1913 is a Carnegie Library as is Didsbury built in 1915.

In 1915 the Trust produced a report which highlighted the lack of a provision of free libraries in rural areas and this was something that the Public Libraries Act of 1919 sought to address. The Act gave the County Councils the power to build and run libraries within the county and removed the cap on public funding (a rate of no more than one penny in the pound) which previously had applied.

Cheshire County Council got started on its adoption of the powers of the 1919 Act in 1921 and, from reading newspaper articles on the annual reports of the Cheshire Rural Libraries Scheme, although many villages were soon enrolled into the scheme it mostly ran along lines such that a village would make available some premises, say the schoolroom for a couple of hours one evening in the week when a box of books would be received from Chester, people enrolled in the scheme could borrow a book and a box would be returned to Chester of earlier borrowings. In some villages it was the school children who were the main focus and the box of books went to the school for the children to borrow. The Chester scheme started off with 7,000 books bought with £2,500 donated by the Carnegie Trust.

So, when did Bramhall join the scheme? The answer is some time before 1934 (see below)

Bramhall did have libraries in the early 1900s but they might not have been free. For example in 1909 there was a library run from the Lofthouses' shop at 4 Bramhall Lane (T W Lofthouse Dealer in Cigars, cigarettes, tobacco; Circulating Library 1400 books; fancy goods, Stationery etc)

The various churches in Bramhall operated small libraries for their members(eg Wesleyans had Sunday School library in 1910, the Congregationalists were raising funds for their library in 1914 and so on).

The building that became Bramhall library was built in 1905/06 and run as a small boys' grammar school but it had ceased to operate by 1920. In 1920 Bramhall was trying to decide what to do about a War Memorial and one suggestion was made that the former grammar school could be run as a social club for ex-servicemen, but in July 1920 it was reported that the scheme for using the school building for ex-servicemen had fallen through and the building was now on the market.

On 6 May 1921 the local newspaper reported that Cheshire County Council has acquired the building known as the Grammar School for a centre for teaching domestic economy. Whether or not that happened, there is no mention in the local newspapers.

There is an entry in Kelly's Directory of Cheshire 1934 in the Bramhall Commercial section that says "Cheshire County Council library branch" but no address is given and the only name is that of the county librarian. This perhaps implies that there were still no permanent premises and it was still opening from, say, the school or a church hall.

In July 1936 the Cheshire Observer devoted almost a whole column to the annual report of the Cheshire County Librarian for the year ended 31 March 1936. Amongst other things he said that libraries were able to provide a far better service if they had a permanent building of their own. He said:

"It is therefore pleasing to report that a permanent branch library is to be erected at Bredbury and Romiley, and that special and more adequate premises are to be provided for the Bramhall branch"

Is that when Bramhall library moved into the old grammar school?

7. Up to modern times

Hazel Grove-cum-Bramhall lasted until 1974 and then following the Local Government Act of that year became part of Stockport Metropolitan Borough.

Sources

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