

In 1870, 3 years after the opening of the Thames Goldfield in 1867, during the first prosperous years of the field (of 69 tons of gold, around 50 came in the first 10 years), Thames set up a Mechanics' Institute.

Temporary premises were soon replaced by a purpose built wooden building, including a hall, museum, reading room and library. Things fell off towards the end of the first 10 years, and the Thames Borough Council, which had started operations early in 1874, heard Government finance was available to help Municipal libraries. One was set up in 1880 in the old Mechanics' Institute buildings in Grahamstown (North Thames), then the principal centre of Thames.

During the latter half of the 1890s there was a paper rather than mine production gold investment boom, followed by the Boer War, and then Depression.

On July 12, 1902, the Thames Star recorded that it was suggested the Thames Borough Council take advantage of Mr. Carnegie's offer "to pay for the erection of a public library in any city in the English speaking world which would provide a site and commit itself to the permanent maintenance of the institution."

"The present building is old and not at all suited to the convenience of the general public. A resolution instructing the Mayor to write to Mr. Carnegie is all that is required. The American millionaire has not to our knowledge given any gifts to the Colonies, and will probably be only too happy to comply with a request from a town in the most progressive and up-to-date Colony in the Southern Seas."

Correspondence duly passed and repassed.

On December 1, 1902, the Thames Star noted that Andrew Carnegie said that in July he had had 226 applications for money to build libraries. One was from Dunedin, New Zealand, "and it was, of course, granted at once."

This sounded quite promising, and further correspondence followed.

Meanwhile Mr. E. Lowe continued as Librarian. A Library Committee of the Thames Borough Council was responsible for additions of books, as noted on July 21, 1903.

By August 7, 1903, things had got to the stage of Carnegie's secretary, James Betram, having written asking for details in connection with the Thames application for a Free Library building. The Thames Borough Council decided that it wanted a building in brick.

On November 13, 1903, it was reported that Andrew Carnegie's secretary had noted, "It seems as if the two large rooms you mention might give the needed accommodation for the library of a small town, or if not, the Librarian's dwelling might be added." But any Library Carnegie assisted must be free, and the Thames Borough Council made a charge of 5 shillings per year, so it was not a Free Library. The Town Clerk was to reply that "The charge was merely a guarantee that the books taken out would be returned."

On December 4, 1903, it was noted that the Waihi Library, with 106 subscribers, had decided to let applying to Andrew Carnegie, for a grant for books, stand over for the time being.

Coromandel also decided to get in on the act. It was reported in the Thames Star of August 18, 1904, that Carnegie's secretary had informed the Coromandel County Council that "grants for libraries cannot be made unless there is an assured income of at least 100 pounds per annum. It was decided to bring the matter on under the notice of the Coromandel public." (Nothing happened slowly.)

With the slow negotiations, long standing librarian Edwin Wass Lowe did not live to see a new Thames Library, dying at age 68, as reported on Sept. 13, 1904.

On September 16 it was noted that his wife was to carry on as Librarian in the meantime.

On the same date it was reported that the main changes in the Library plans were that the caretaker's house was to be detached, and the caretaker's rooms turned into lavatories etc. For said caretaker's house it was decided to buy for 65 pounds the property at the rear.

On December 9, 1904, it was noted that Mrs. Lowe was carrying on at the existing Library with the help of one of her sons.

Finally, on December 22, it was announced that Andrew Carnegie had written approving the Thames Library Plans, even if a 10 feet wide hallway wasted some space. The Borough Council made Mrs. Lowe acting librarian for the time being, but standing orders precluded a permanent position without calling for applicants.

Meanwhile, during the latter part of 1904 the Waiotahi gold mine got into a rich "bonanza."

1905 opened with prosperity in Thames and at the Auckland Stock Exchange.

On January 24, 1905, it was noted that Carnegie's grant was £2,000 (two thousand pounds) for the Thames Public Library.

On February 10, 1905, it was considered that there being no local tenders for the Library building indicated that there was no lack of work in Thames. Which was "looking up." At the present time there are four important undertakings under weigh. Public baths have been commenced. The old Library is being shifted preparatory to the Carnegie building being erected. Plans of the new High School buildings have been approved. No time will be lost in the erection of the Technical School."

On February 14 it was noted that the old Library buildings had been temporarily shifted to the corner section of Queen and Cochrane Streets.

For the new Library the tender of Iye and Son for 1,964 pounds was accepted, being the lowest.

It was considered that the old building should be sold for removal and a new residence erected for the Librarian. *This may have referred to the cottage.

On February 18, 1905, the Thames Star noted that Thames had "in course of construction a public library to cost £2,000, swimming baths to cost £1,300, a new high school at £1,000, and a technical college at £800."

It was noted on February 21 that William Wood's tender was accepted for the old Librarian's dwelling cottage, for the sum of £8-2-6. He was at that time shifting some old cottages out of Thames for beach baches along the Thames Coast.

On February 23 it was noted that J. Currie was architect for both the Library and the High School.

On February 27 that the scow Winnie brought a cargo of bricks for the contractor of the public library buildings, from Auckland.

While the cottage residence was sold for a small sum, even for those days, there does not seem to be any record of the main library, ex-Mechanics' Institute building after it was shifted out of the way. Being quite a building, of good kauri, which borer does not like because of the gum in the heart timber, it could still be doing duty as a largeish residence in Thames.

On April 6, 1905, the Thames Star recorded, "The ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the new public library took place this afternoon in the presence of a goodly number of people." James McGowan officiated. The Hon. James McGowan was Member of the House of Representatives (M.H.R.) for the Thames electorate from 1893 to 1908, and held various Ministerial positions. At this time he was Minister of Justice (1900-1906. Later in 1906 he became Minister of Mines, till 1909 (in the Upper House or Legislative Council).

As recorded on April 7, when laying the Library foundation stone McGowan said, "A district without any means of mental, literary or educational advancement becomes stagnant, non progressive, while those where means of mental recreation are liberally provided, raise themselves from the common level, and are found alert, progressive and prosperous."

Other speakers said "that if the urgent requirements of the public library were placed before Thames residents there would be a hearty response and a cordial co-operation with the Borough Council that would enable our library to rank second to none outside similar institutions in the city."

On May 12, 1905, it was noted that Mrs. Harriet Lowe, Librarian, was carrying one with the help of a son and daughter.

Next day it was reported that the Thames Public Library had its brick and masonry work in the main building nearly completed, also the "pillars which abut on the street."

On June 22, 1905, it was noted that when the matter of the disposal of the old library buildings came up with the Thames Borough Council, there was reference to an allotment at the corner of Cochrane and Queen streets. (Which was where they had earlier been supposed to be shifted to.)

(In connection with the tender just under 2,000 pounds, an advertisement on June 29, 1905, had as a cheap sale price children's slippers at ninepence and 1 shilling per pair.)

New Mayor Archibald (Arch.) Burns, elected April 27, 1905, said, as reported on September 13, 1905, "We are getting a few improvements certainly, but do not let it stop at these. We will have a splendid Library, the Baths are nearing completion, and the small recreation ground will soon be enlarged." (Victoria Park) He detailed other plans, including a Town Hall, in prosperous golden 1905.

On October 27, 1905, it was announced that the New Public Library was to be opened by Mayor Burns on November 2. This was over 3 years since Thames first had the idea of a Carnegie Library in July 1902.

On November 2, 1905, the new Thames Public Library was formally opened by Mayor Arch Burns, with tributes to Andrew Carnegie, architect J. Currie and contractors J. Lye and Sons. It was set back 12 feet from the footpath to be undisturbed, with an iron fence parallel to the footpath.

The main library room was 35 by 25 feet, with 4,000 books. The news room was 25 by 18, with behind it and with a separate entrance a ladies' reading and writing room 16 by 14 feet, with between it and the hall the librarian's room, 11 by 10 feet, with conveniences further back, for ladies and gentlemen. All rooms were furnished with grates for fires.

The Thames Star had more re Library on November 3. There were thanks to the Town Clerk, "the Secretary of the Library Committee, who, in the face of opposition, pressed that an application should be made for a grant, who stated the case in such a clear and complete manner, and removed objections that were first made."

It was noted, as regards costs and maintenance, that the Thames Borough Council had to pay these, while the Thames County Council also got the benefit.

This Town Clerk was Albert Bruce (May 1896 - July 1909).

By November 20, 1905, a new residence for librarian Mrs. Lowe had been completed, a "neat cottage" behind the new Library.

On December 22, 1905, Mayor Arch. Burns was quoted as thinking the new swimming baths were more important than the new Library, as they already had had a Library building, and could have got on all right, but no baths.

(Unfortunately for the baths, an "expert" engineer had a thing against concret and the baths were made of planking with clay sealing, and in a few years the planking rotted, leaving the Library to long outlast said baths, which were two or three blocks away, on the waterfront by the end of Cochrane Street.)

On April 2, 1906, there appeared, "Mr. Carnegie adheres firmly to his condition that the library shall be absolutely free to all users. This is apparently a stipulation which Mr. Carnegie everywhere insists upon, and the exceptions of Thames and Westport were probably due to inadvertence on his part."

On May 16, 1907, it was reported that plans for a Carnegie Library at Waihi had been drawn up, and were to be forwarded with a request for a grant of 3,000 pounds. Which did not happen.

On August 31, 1907, there was news of the arrival of an autographed picture of Andrew Carnegie to be put in the Thames Library, in memory of his 2,000 pounds grant.

Since amalgamation in 1975 the Thames Public Library has been owned by the Thames-Coromandel District Council, which recently decided to raise a loan of 250,000 dollars to cover purchase of land and buildings including the Wesley Centre at a figure of \$180,000, the balance to enlarge and fit out said Wesley Centre to make a more commodious and better arranged Library, and in a central position opposite the Supermarket, it having previously in a central position when Grahamstown (North Thames) was the main centre of Thames.

The other building on the land, an 1869 church, the oldest left in Thames, was earmarked for a performing arts centre, a committee of citizens having at its disposal a good \$60,000 for painting and repairing and fitting up.

However, immediately following the District Council's decision, a petition was circulated and obtained the number of signatures required for a poll, and a voluntary poll is accordingly being taken in connection with the current local body elections by postal vote. In case the poll goes against the loan, alternative means of financing and setting up the cultural complex of library and performing arts centre in this central position have already been outlined in the local Press, while it is understood that alternative employment can be found for the Carnegie library building, about which some public concern was expressed.