

The Natal Society Library, 1975 to 1995

The Natal Society Library has been in existence for 150 years, but the last twenty years have probably seen the greatest change and development. They are briefly reviewed in this article.

Twenty years ago, on Monday 26 May 1975, the new Natal Society Library building on Churchill Square opened its doors to the public. During these years, the Natal Society Library has changed considerably.

The new library proved popular with the people of Pietermaritzburg. During its first year, some 2 700 new members joined and books issued increased by nearly 90 000. By 1985, the membership had risen from 19 500 to 35 500 and the annual book circulation from 691 000 to 11 270 000.

The greatly increased storage space meant that the Natal Society could at last have all its material under one roof. A periodicals and newspaper department was started in the basement, special collections – maps, government publications, Africana and rare books, and the O'Brien Library – were housed on the third floor, and a music library stocked with a good collection of records, tapes and scores, was opened on the second floor.

The most profound change was that in its new building, the Library would be open to all races. It was one of the first non-racial libraries in South Africa. Unfortunately, this decision was only taken on 13 May 1974, some two years after the building of the new library had begun, and no-one foresaw the dramatic increase in library usage this decision would cause. It was not long before the library was having difficulty in accommodating all who wanted to use it, especially in the Reference and Children's departments.

The Reference Department was most profoundly affected by this change. In the old library, it had been a quiet and peaceful place to work in. The staff did all the cataloguing of periodicals, legal deposit material and reference books, manned the switchboard and dealt with the public – mainly schoolchildren doing projects, the occasional author or student doing research and older people wanting answers to quiz-questions and crossword puzzles.

The new Reference Department was soon discovered by schoolchildren of all races, who found it an ideal source of information for their projects, and before long, they had virtually taken it over. In 1981 therefore, the Chief Librarian, Mrs S.S. Wallis, decided to close the old Market Square branch, which, since 1958 had provided a service to the 'non-white community' and re-open it as the Lambert Wilson School Project Centre. It was a great success and was soon packed with children, especially on Saturdays.

The relief for the Reference Department was short-lived. The rapidly growing demand for education in the Black communities led to an ever-increasing number of students of all levels using it – UNISA students, teacher trainees, student nurses, policemen, etc. – and now it is as crowded as ever. African school children found the library a place where they could study in peace and quiet – conditions which, for many, would not be available at home or school. In the months leading up to the end of year examinations, they packed into every available space in the library. In 1991, thanks to generous donations from the British and Canadian governments and a number of local companies, the first floor of the Lambert Wilson Library was turned into a large study centre to cater for them, virtually doubling the area available for study.

With the price of modern textbooks putting them beyond the reach of many students, our Legal Deposit Collection is playing a vital role in education for the new South Africa.

During these twenty years, a number of branch libraries have been opened. Four small libraries run by the City Council in the Indian and Coloured areas were taken over in 1983, and in 1987, a large new library in Northdale was opened. Two of the small libraries in the Indian area were amalgamated with it, but the other two, Eastwood and Woodlands have been considerably expanded. A library service at Grey's Hospital was started in 1985, which has proved popular with the staff as well as the patients. A similar service at the Northdale Hospital was started in November 1989. In 1992 a library bus was bought and a travelling library service to the suburbs started.

The new library building has not been without problems. It has a flat roof, and like many flat roofs, it developed leaks, and at one time buckets had to be placed in the staffroom on the top floor to catch the rainwater coming through the ceiling. The air-conditioning plant proved unreliable and broke down several times. No spare parts were available in this country, and on a couple of occasions it was out of action for several months waiting for spares to be imported. The industrial neon lighting installed in the stack areas and basement was extremely noisy – the basement was for a time re-named the 'Buzzmet'. Gradually it has been replaced and the noise eliminated.

In accordance with the prevailing architectural fashions of the 1970s, the outside of the building was cladded with imported tiles, which were quite incapable of withstanding the extremes of Pietermaritzburg's climate, and within three years large sections threatened to fall off. Wooden barricades had to be erected around the building and a stout wooden canopy over the entrance. This, in addition to keeping the tiles off the public's heads, also kept off the sun and rain, and proved a useful, if unsightly, addition. The lawyers had a field day deciding whose fault it was, and it was not until 1982 that the tiles were removed and the building plastered, by which time several small plants could be observed growing out of the library walls. A number of other public buildings in Pietermaritzburg suffered a similar fate at about the same time.

The number of staff employed by the Library rose from 55 in 1975 to 102 in 1994 (of which 12 have endured the whole twenty years). Miss U.E.M. Judd, Chief Librarian from 1951, who was largely responsible for planning the new building, resigned in 1974 and was replaced by Mr A.S.C. Hooper, who organised the move. He resigned in 1980 to become librarian at the University of Cape Town and was succeeded by our present Director, Mrs S.S. Wallis.

Apart from occasional periods of prosperity – in the 1870s and 1970s – the



The new library, built 1975 (after removal of tiles)

Natal Society, throughout its long history, has been plagued by a shortage of money. During the last fifteen years, our financial position has become more difficult, with continued inflation, the decline of the Rand and the disastrous increase in the cost of books. (The annual report for 1975/76 stated that the average cost of each book acquired by the library was R4,02. Today, this would buy three copies of the *Natal Witness*!).

There has been a steady increase in the use made of all the services offered by the library, in particular the Reference library which is overcrowded as is the Children's Library.

As a consequence, it was recognised that certain changes would have to be made:

- A larger study area;
- A Reference library buying policy to reflect the needs of the community;
- Staffing policy to be re-assessed according to the change in society;
- Materials to be re-organised to be more accessible;
- Active liaison with the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature to provide an efficient service for all its needs.

In recent years the library's services have expanded considerably. This trend continues, entailing greatly increased responsibilities for the staff.

The user group served by the library is far broader than previously with a far greater spectrum of information and literary needs.

The Natal Society Library will face many challenges in the following years as the service and its responsibilities increase. Change is essential if the challenges now faced are to be met and overcome.

One particularly gratifying fact is that the old library building in Longmarket Street, which served the Natal Society for nearly 100 years, is still serving the public. It was taken over by Pietermaritzburg and District Council for the Care of the Aged and re-opened as a senior citizens club. Our members who grew up with the old library can still find a haven there.

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