

AN ORAL HISTORY OF SWISS COTTAGE LIBRARY

INTERVIEWEE: Lesley Atkinson Interviewed by: Sheela Kenan, 11th September 2025

DATE OF BIRTH: 1947 - Romford, Essex

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS: Both in the health professions

Lesley spent 4 years at St Pancras Library before joining Swiss Cottage in 1975. There were 75 staff members at the time - 8 in the Reference Library – Head, Deputy, 4 staff and 2 library assistants. Later there were some part time staff members. The Lending Library had 3 times as many staff because they had a huge number of books to shelve every day. Daily footfall in the 1970s and 1980s was in the hundreds.

She initially wanted to become a teacher but then decided on librarianship because she loved books and helping the public. She went to St. Pancras Library to enquire about a job and was taken on the same day. When she came to Swiss Cottage Library, she was very impressed by the building and wide range of books. Holborn and St. Pancras were commuter libraries at the time whereas Swiss Cottage was buzzing on Saturdays and very steady during the week. She was placed in the Reference Library because she knew about the stock and the inter-lending systems and had no interaction with the Lending Library. All the books in the reference library had to have an index and had Dewey numbers for placing. Otherwise they had to go into the lending library.

All staff, except library assistants, at the time had to have library qualifications plus a degree. Lesley did a first degree and then a part time course in Librarianship at Hammersmith College. Library school was essential in those days as was on the job training. Swiss Cottage, Holborn and St. Pancras had to act as one because they all had different subject collections. Swiss Cottage had the arts and literature. Staff had to know about all the resources as they continuously had phone, letter and in-person enquiries and there always had to be two people on the desk. Morning enquiries often related to crossword solutions. It was very strict – phones could not be answered if a library user was speaking to a member of staff.

There was a big music library which was very heavily used including by a variety of famous people. There were many regulars and it was steady throughout the year except during the spring with an influx of O and A level students – the younger one were rowdy and undisciplined. Community information gradually became very important and Sindex, which names all local organisations, was born at Swiss Cottage. Technology led to a reduction in staff and amalgamation of reference and lending libraries.

In Leslie's job the first hour of the day was spent in shelving items left out and moving stock around. Then she had to be on the Enquiry desk – each person had to do 1.5 hours at a time. Reference staff got 15 mins for a tea break and Lending staff had longer as they had more heavy shelving to do. She most enjoyed correctly interpreting what a user wanted and showing them how to use the material available and educating the public. A variety of users came in – pensioners, adult students and the unemployed looking for resources to help find a job. She also had some challenges - sometimes people with mental health problems came in and staff had to call social services to come in to deal with them.

The Union played an important role. In 1998 staff were on strike for 3 months because music, philosophy and other specialities were removed and staff let go. Lesley felt there was no rancour between supporters and non-supporters of the strike.

There is no such thing as a typical librarian according to Leslie. Today they are all from a variety of professional backgrounds. In the early 2000s the Library refurbishment meant that the reference and lending staff had to train in both skillsets. In the early days there was a hierarchy of staff but around the 1980s it became flatter. Before the maternity leave provisions came in, female staff did not return to work but later they did so continuity and grading changed. "Career grade" was a new term and meant that people applied for promotions. The Reference library staff went out locally for dinner every 2 months and there were a number of romances among the staff.

Lesley mentioned that previously a variety of resources had to be provided to satisfy legal requirements but not now. Earlier adult education evening classes stimulated people to read around their subject. The librarians tried to encourage reading to help mental health through adult literacy and English as a second language classes.

A memorable moment for Lesley was the installation of rolling stacks in the basement which doubled the space for reserve stock. It was a new idea at the time as before that books were sent to Pickford's, then brought back and kept as rolling stock. Staff had to ensure that no-one got trapped in them. Covid vaccinations were also given here and round tables removed to comply with social distancing. The refurbishment opened up a lot of public space which had a beautifying effect and controlled the temperatures in the library. It is designed in a very flexible way. All staff had to be re-

accommodated when St Pancras Library was closed and a lot of the stock came to Swiss Cottage. Maps and Periodicals became the Map Room and Swiss Cottage became the designated Central Library.

Leslie's favourite part of the Library is the area housing the philosophy books and her favourite books are THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY AND DICTIONARY OF IRISH BIOGRAPHY.

Developments in technology impacted Leslie's role, for example, initially there was a card catalogue, then it was digital but not on the internet (only for worker use) and then fully computerised. She had much more contact with the public earlier but now the role is much more administrative. Reductions of staff led to reduction in service and she could never have envisaged today's small number of staff. Self-issue and returns has led to this. Book covering and repair is now done externally. The Library used to serve the core community but plays a much wider role now

According to Lesley the challenge in the future would be how best to use the space if footfall decreases. The extra space may need to be used for health or book related organisations which will see the library flourish for another 60 years! She would like to see more use of the non-fiction stock and starting up of non-fiction reading groups.

She mentioned that a very illustrious librarian, Michael Gorman, used to work in the old Swiss Cottage Library. He was a brilliant cataloguer and taught her. He became Head of the British National Bibliography and later became President of the American Library Association.

Lesley is now retired but involved with the University of the Third Age.