

A Journey through some Potteries Libraries

Mark Conlon



LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

A Media Action Group for Mental Health Project

I have always loved going to the library. One of my most vivid childhood memories is of visiting the local library in the village of Milton, where I grew up in the 1970s. The library there gave me the chance to find out about a wide range of subjects. Eager to know more, I read everything from ancient myths and military history to ghost stories. The little library in Milton is now long gone, but for me it still brings back very fond memories.

Another library I remember with affection was the one in Stoke, on London Road. It was, and still is, a striking building, decorated on the outside with a mosaic of William Shakespeare and large round windows like oversized portholes. Inside it seemed to cram, almost like a Tardis, a huge number of books into a limited amount of space. Its nooks and crannies gave it an old-fashioned charm which just can't be replicated in the modern buildings that house our libraries today.





But of all the libraries I have enjoyed going to over the years, I would have to say that the one closest to my heart is the City Central Library, which can be found on Bethesda Street in Hanley. It opened its doors to the public in 1970, and it's fair to say that some people may view it as a pretty unattractive modern building. But, as the saying goes, you should never judge a book by its cover, as inside proves to be a very different story! In the warm and welcoming interior of this building you will be greeted by

row after row of paperbacks, hardbacks, even audio books, on a seemingly endless array of subjects and topics.

During my teenage years, Hanley library enabled me to pursue a lot of different interests, from short stories to philosophy, with many stops in-between. It was here that I discovered the joys to be found in the history section, and my fascination with the subject grew, largely fed by the many books I was able to borrow and take home from my favourite library, and all free of charge!



And it wasn't just the books that grabbed my interest; I was also a regular visitor to the music department in Hanley library.

At that time, CDs were still unheard of, and it was stocked from floor to ceiling with vinyl LPs and cassette tapes. Leafing through the racks of LPs, enclosed within clear plastic sleeves, it was great to come across a new discovery, which I would then eagerly carry home to put on my turntable.

You could borrow all types of music at the library counter. As well as the progressive rock that I love, the department stocked just about any style of music, and the variety I found there sparked other long-lasting interests in modern jazz and classical music.

Through the years, libraries have continued to play an important role in my life. I have always found them welcoming places to visit and spend time.

More recently, these familiar surroundings have provided me with something of a safe haven following a period of ill health. I had gradually begun to lose interest in daily life and became unable to enjoy the things I used to; after a while I realised I was very depressed. Having previously had little more knowledge of mental health than most people, after being diagnosed with severe depression I was able to find out a lot by reading some of the books available in the psychology section.

My regular visits to Hanley library steadily brought back to life my ability to absorb and take pleasure in the written word. Not only was the library an excellent source of information for me, but the members of staff there were also unfailingly helpful and pleasant. I found it of immense help to be able to go somewhere where I was welcomed unconditionally, as I had become aware of the stigma and discrimination that people with experience of mental ill health often encounter.





Burslem's public library, only recently I was able to visit the town's library in its current location at the School of Art.

For me, the public library has been, by turns, a place to discover and learn, somewhere where you are made to feel welcome, and a source of much enjoyment. It's one of our great public institutions: in visiting your local library you will, at the very least, find an oasis of calm away from today's hectic world.

In a way, the library became a bridge linking back to a happier past as well as connecting to a more hopeful future.

Since then, my health has continued to improve, although I do still have my ups-and-downs. Through it all, libraries have continued to play a crucial role in my life. There are still local libraries that I look forward to discovering. Although unfortunately I never visited the beautiful Wedgwood Institute that once housed

Mark Conlon Biography

Mark Conlon was born in 1965 and grew up in Stoke-on-Trent in the village of Milton. After going to Holden Lane High School and the Sixth Form College in Fenton, he studied History at the University of Manchester to postgraduate level. Having always been interested in books and reading, Mark stayed on in Manchester to work in two bookshops, as well as a record shop, before returning to his home town in 2002.

Aside from his involvement in combating stigma and discrimination, Mark has a wide range of interests that include literature, politics, cinema and music, particularly 'prog rock', and free jazz. In the future he would like to return to studying. In the meantime Mark remains a strong supporter of public libraries and their place in the community.



LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

Local People, Local Lives is an exciting new project devised by the Media Action Group for Mental Health to challenge stereotypical myths about people who live with mental ill health. Project volunteers, all local people, will utilise stories from their own lives, which will be presented in a variety of entertaining and informative media. Inaccurate public perceptions will be challenged through the telling of real stories of people who live with a diagnosis of mental ill health.

For more information, contact John Gibson on
01782 285800 or email john@magmh.org.uk

Visit www.magmh.org.uk for more information about
the Media Action Group for Mental Health