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New Library

An inconspicuous minute received without comment by the Norwich City Council yesterday showed there is now a possibility that the Government may sanction a loan for the building of the new public library whose site in Bethel Street was designated as long ago as 1938.

For much longer than that, a new central library has been considered one of the prime educational needs of the city. Norwich prides itself on having been the first city to adopt the Public Libraries Act of 1850. The present library, built in 1857, was one of the first products of that Act. But it was built to serve a population of 70,000, a good many of whom were illiterate, and there is no reason at all for pride that the same building, become dingy, cramped and altogether inadequate, now has to serve a population of 121,000 as their main lending and reference library, while at the same time the staff strive as best they can to make it a repository of the records of Norfolk, which has probably a richer heritage of historic documents than any other county in England.

Mr. Philip Hepworth, who was appointed Librarian just over two years ago, has awakened Norwich to the fact that it is falling behind the rest of the country in its cultivation of the habit of reading. The circulation of books, although increasing, is still far below what it ought to be, and the library is inhibited by sheer lack of space from offering half the encouragement that should be given both to general readers and students. Moreover the wonderful city archives, going back over 800 years, are difficult of access, and so is the rest of the great collection of local books and manuscripts, which is reputed the finest in the country. These possessions, which ought to be one of the glories of Norwich, are not yet doing the service they might to scholarship.

To these very strong reasons for building a new library there may be added the obligation under which the city lies to the 2nd Division of the United States Air Force. The Division was based on Norfolk during the war, and in 1945 its officers and men, wishing to commemorate their comrades who gave their lives in the assault on Germany, subscribed £20,000 to build for the new Norwich library an entrance hall which would serve as an American memorial. The library was chosen as a building which would promote international friendship and learning, and moreover, it was then considered likely to be the first great civic project accomplished after the war.

During the long postponement of the building the local governors of the fund have been sorely perplexed as to the proper fulfilment of their trust. Alternatives have been considered, but it would be far better if the original intention of the officers and men serving in 1945 could now be carried out. Not less would Norwich be gratified if the civic project entertained these twenty years past were shortly realised, and the centenary of the old library celebrated by the opening of its successor.

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