

26th Feb - Judith Wright – A History of Boots Booklovers Library

Jesse Boot's marriage to Florence Rowe, the daughter of a successful bookseller and stationer transformed the Nottingham chemist's retail shops. Florence's artistic flair for displaying cosmetics toiletries and perfume progressed into buying stocks of clean second hand books for loan to customers.



Before the days of cheap paperbacks, the general public had limited access to books. Public libraries were ill equipped and rarely offered fiction. Combining a lending library with a chemist's shop was an instant success. The books were cleverly placed on the upper floor or at the back of the shop to encourage borrowers to be tempted by the enticing goods on display. The Booklovers Library was furnished to provide the comfortable domestic experience which would appeal to female customers .

Suitable girls were trained as library staff and considered themselves superior to the shop assistants though their pay was no higher. After initial training, staff were expected to take examinations in Book Knowledge, Understanding the Boots Library System and Customer Relations.

Two main types of subscription were offered. Class A entitled the subscriber to personal service and newly published books. The Class B subscribers had to search the shelves for themselves for books that were at least a year old. In addition, the expensive On Demand Service guaranteed any book ordered would be provided within three days.

Membership of Boots Booklovers Library peaked at around one Million during W.W.2 but the post war years brought social change. Public Libraries improved and began stocking popular fiction. Penguin paperbacks were readily available and at sixpence each were affordable. With rising costs and falling membership Boots Libraries struggled to survive. When Boots expanded its range of goods, the library areas could be put to more profitable use and the last closure came in 1966. The genteel middleclass atmosphere of the Booklovers Library could not compete with "The Swinging Sixties."