

## Transformations of the Leighton Library, by Katie Halsey



1: Dunblane in the eighteenth century. Francis Grose, 'Dunblane', pen and watercolour on paper, © National Galleries Scotland.

Robert Leighton left his books to Dunblane 'to remain there for the vse of the Clergie of that Diocess' along with £100 sterling to make a 'chamber' for the books. His executors envisaged a building with two large rooms, one for the books, and one for the librarian. This vision never transpired; instead the library was built in its current format, with one large room for the books and an Undercroft, which was dedicated to the use of the librarian, who could either live in it or rent it out.

The Leighton Library's earliest borrowing records (1699–1745) show that despite Leighton's intentions, it was frequented not only by the 'Clergie of that Diocess', but also by lay persons, including local landowners, a schoolmaster and a boltmaker. Nonetheless, the majority of users in this period were clergymen. Access to the Leighton Library by people who were not clergymen was formalised in 1734 when the trustees agreed upon a subscription for 'civis' members. From this time on, the Leighton Library operated much more like a subscription library (a type of library that developed in the eighteenth century).

Subscription libraries charged an annual fee, but they were not normally commercial ventures. Instead, the subscribers usually paid not only their annual subscription (which allowed them to borrow books) but often also an entrance fee to possess a share in the library; the share holders owned the library, chose the books, and typically ran the library themselves. In the case of the Leighton Library, the books were not owned in common, instead remaining the property of the library itself, but in all other ways, it operated like a subscription library, with a board of Trustees who were also subscribers and users of the library, who oversaw the acquisition of books and the management aspects of the library. Subscribers were charged various amounts over the

course of the library's history including half a crown (2s 6d) from 1734 and half a guinea (10s 6d) from 1757, largely remaining at this rate for remainder of the Leighton's time as a subscription library. Some, principally trustees or major local landholders such as Sir Hugh Paterson of Bannockburn (1685-1777) or Francis Stuart, the 9th Earl of Moray (1737-1810), paid more than this or subscribed as members without intending to borrow books.

Leighton's initial collection was expanded from around 1740 onwards, with the Trustees seemingly operating an active acquisitions policy based on buying what they considered to be new and important eighteenth-century books. The period 1740-1820 was probably the heyday of the library; it was used regularly, the collections were expanded and renewed, and it's clear that the library played an important part in the intellectual life of the area.

In 1815, the library further opened up its collections to a wider group of users. Following the discovery of mineral springs at nearby Cromlix, the library's Trustees decided to experiment with a more flexible form of subscription, allowing visitors to the town a temporary (fortnightly) subscription of 2s 6d. These visitors were recorded in a separate register, known as the 'Water Drinkers' register, and included a large number of female borrowers. Indeed, the first 'Water Drinker' recorded was a woman, Mrs Dalzell.

Borrowings were recorded until the 1840s, after which time the library began to decline in use. The library was briefly used as a newspaper reading room in the 1840s and continued to be used as a meeting space in later decades. However, it remained largely moribund until the early 1980s when a small group of dedicated volunteers saw the importance and potential of the library as a site for heritage tourism and worked hard to open it to visitors and to ensure that the books, MSS and fabric of the building would be safeguarded for the future. Fundraising for the restoration of the library building began in 2020 and the restoration was completed in 2024.

