

Libraries in Bellville



An historical overview

ILZE SWART

Chief Librarian, Bellville Public Library

The first library in Bellville was started in 1918 under the auspices of the Protection and Vigilance Association. It was housed in a building in Durban Road on the banks of the Elsieskraal River. Members paid an annual subscription and by the end of 1920 there were over 800 volumes in the library.

The Village Management Board was instituted as a statutory body in 1922. A new library was built at a cost of 1900 pounds. In 1930 the cost of hiring the hall for an afternoon meeting was 7/6 and for

an evening meeting 12/6.

In the late 1950s the Cape Provincial Library Service (CPLS) canvassed local authorities to provide a free library service to their residents and to enter into an agreement whereby CPLS would provide material and support services, and the local authority an approved building and staff. The issue was debated at council meetings over many years. When a fellow councillor said Bellville could not afford a new library, Dr Gerald Anstey, who is still a Friend today, said that council could not afford NOT to build a new library.

A free public library service came to Bellville on 25 August 1964, with the opening of the library in Coronation (later Kruskal) Avenue, built at a cost of R190,000. It was a classic, stylish building,



▲ Bellville Library in Coronation (later Kruskal) Avenue. A stylish building for its time, it was completed in 1964 at a cost of R190 000

designed by architects Tribelhorn and Doveton. Furniture and fittings were of an exceptional quality, and some of the shelving is still in use in the present library. Three extensions and 25 years later, Council took the decision to build a new library in Elizabeth Park after it was offered R1m for the Kruskal Avenue building by the developers of Middelstad Mall. The envisaged multi-storey building did not materialise and for many years the building was occupied by Edulis, library headquarters of the Education Department. In 2008 Edulis moved out and sadly this Bellville landmark was rased.

Planning for the Elizabeth Park Library began in 1986, when the architects Engelbrecht and Bester were appointed. After visiting several libraries in South Africa with them, I typed up the architect's brief after consultation with our staff. It took another three years before the building was opened to the public on 20 November 1989. Those years presented a huge learning curve for the staff, who planned layouts, chose furniture and equipment, liaised with suppliers and most scarily, had to decide on a colour scheme which our borrowers would have to live with. We also planned for computerisation and had to identify network points and cabling, though it would take another five years before we went live in January 1995.

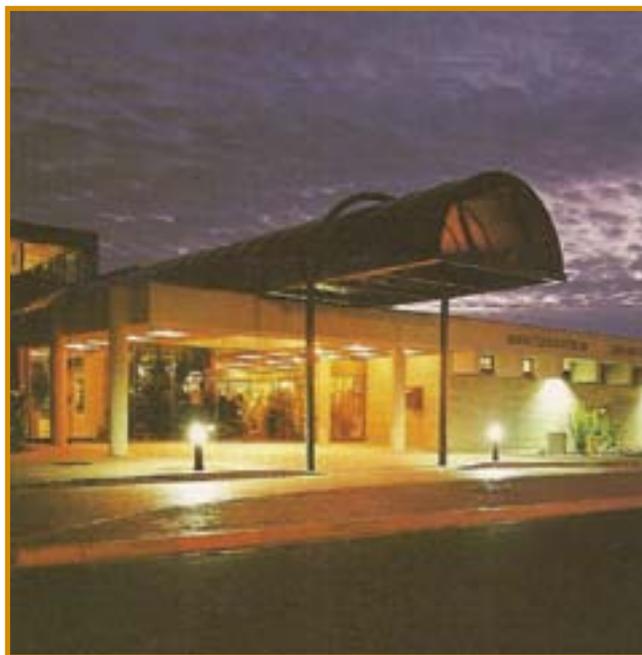
We received enormous support from our municipal colleagues, from the town clerk, John Marshall, who authorised additional expenditure for books, to engineers Ebke Farber and Johan Rauch, the Procurement Department, our PR officer Sue Pause and many others, and of course the staff at the Provincial Library Service. The chairman of our Friends, Frans van der Merwe, was then director of the Provincial Library Service, so he has been associated with this building since its inception.

Once the new building was ready for occupation a carefully planned six week closure included a stocktaking, the physical move from one building to the other and two weeks to set up the new library. A human chain passed books from inside the library on to a mobile library. When it was full, the book van drove to the new library and the chain walked across to the park. The process was reversed as the van was unpacked.

The Monday morning of the opening dawned. After a champagne breakfast for the staff, Mayor Willie van Schoor cut the ribbon to admit borrowers to the lending library. He later told me that if Council had known what a success the library would be with the public, it would have approved the bigger building we had asked for at a cost of R12.3m and which Council had pruned to a final figure of R9.6m.

Mr Van Schoor also commented on the empty shelves in the Reference Section downstairs. We had moved from a reference corner of 47m² in the old library to a 406 m² area with seating for 60 people. I replied that the collection would be developed in time, and so it happened: today there are some 8500 books, and 1620 subjects covered in the pamphlet collection. In 2000 the study space in Reference was extended to accommodate an additional 24 seats, thanks to approval by local councilors and funding authorised by Councillor G Leukes.

The success of the library in Elizabeth Park is due to several factors:



▲ The new building in Elizabeth Park that was completed in 1989 at a cost of R9.6 million

- a spacious, interesting, contemporary building;
- the facilities and resources provided;
- the staff and the quality of service they provide. Nine staff members have worked at Bellville Library for 20 or more years;
- the Friends of the Library, without whose sustained support over almost 40 years Bellville Library would not be what it is today. They have provided moral support, and sponsored facilities such as photocopiers, resources such as library material in many formats, furniture and, especially for our birthday, a new garden which has given our exterior appearance a much-needed face lift.

Almost since its inception, Bellville has been the busiest library in the Western Cape, at its peak issuing over a million items per annum. Currently we have been identified as a flagship library in the City of Cape Town together with the Central Library in the Drill Hall. This means that our staff, building and facilities will be upgraded in the next year. Our challenge in the future is to harness technology to improve and diversify our service.

- ▶ A glimpse of the new garden

