

# Do You Remember...

## ...the Library Campaign

Who now remembers the campaign to keep Botley Library open when it was threatened with closure in 1998? I do, of course, because so many of the meetings were held in my house. Besides, I was one of the original group who felt that our precious library *must not* be allowed to close. Now seems a good time to remember what we did, just in case a similar emergency should arise in the current round of belt-tightening.

'Why Botley Library?' was the baffling question, since it was clearly well-used, and providing excellent service to many different sectors of the community. We found out that, for historic reasons, the building has to pay business rents, so is more expensive to run than other libraries are.

Someone who remembers the campaign well is Arthur Fisher. At the time he was a vigorous octogenarian. Now he is well into his nineties he still has a clear picture of key moments in the campaign: How, as one of three men and several women, he put himself forward to be on the committee at the public meeting in the Baptist Church. How the campaign took over the Seacourt Hall one Saturday morning and provided sheets of paper, stamps and addresses for people to write to. 'I walked up and down the pavement outside,' he said, 'urging people to go in and write.'

He remembers the time we took our placards to protest outside County Hall in the company of energetic campaigners from the other dozen or so libraries earmarked for closure. 'Had you ever done that kind of thing before?' I asked. No, he hadn't. He felt he was in good company though, when he spotted Mr M Hugh-Jones, the secretary of the Oxfordshire Pensioners Association, among the protesters.

The campaign was helped on its way by a grant from the Parish Council. We also raised some money by holding book sales in the shopping centre, and used it to fund subscriptions to a couple of national papers for people to read in the library. We also bought books. A small book was deposited in the library for people to write their comments in, and I still have it in my care. I used it as the basis of our speech to the County Council. A mighty petition was set up, and signed by a large proportion of Botley residents. The photograph shows it bound into a colourful book ready for presentation to the Council, and surrounded by members of the campaign, Ann Thomas the librarian, and Evan Harris our MP, who was a firm supporter and occasionally attended our meetings despite his busy Westminster schedule.

In the end, local democracy triumphed. The County Council called a big meeting for all the library campaigns to put their case, and together we succeeded in persuading them to keep the libraries open. It later emerged that the Labour government had decided to install computer terminals in the nation's public libraries to give everyone access to the Internet, and no doubt this helped the decision, but the power of public opinion backed by determined action can't be under-estimated!

**Ag MacKeith**