
The Larkin25 celebrations, Hull 2010

Valerie Stevenson
Chair, Focus editorial board
Head of Research and Learner Support
Liverpool John Moores University
Maryland Street
Liverpool L1 9DE
Tel: 0151 231 3178
Email: v.stevenson@ljmu.ac.uk



The Larkin Trail, Hull

Shortly after I agreed to take over from Antony Brewerton as chair of the SCONUL Focus editorial board in the summer of 2010 I learned that there was a programme of events running in Hull to commemorate the life of Philip Larkin, probably Britain's best-known university librarian and one of the nation's favourite poets. It occurred to me that reporting on the Larkin25¹ celebrations would be an ideal first editorial assignment and I made arrangements to spend a couple of days in Hull in November, when I felt that the dark, dank weather would provide a fitting backdrop to my exploration of the life of a famously gloomy writer. Armed with my copy of Larkin's collected poetry and Andrew Motion's biography² I set my SatNav for the north-east and headed off on a journey of discovery.

I didn't know very much about Philip Larkin before I started this assignment. I am sure there will be many SCONUL members who remember him very well from his thirty-year tenure as university librarian at Hull and regular delegate

at the SCONUL annual conference but he died in 1985 only a year after I took up my first library post so I never met him. I had a vague impression of a quiet, rather lugubrious and solitary man who considered 'the toad *work*'³ to be one of life's burdens to be tolerated only as a means of supporting his writing. As I read more about him and followed the Larkin trail around Hull, my impressions changed as a more complex picture emerged. Larkin was someone who, although he felt and expressed so beautifully in his poems the weight of mortality and occasional existential despair, was also a man who enjoyed jazz, photography and parties. He even revealed in a BBC interview with John Betjeman for the *Monitor* programme⁴ that work 'rather suited him' and his meticulous library committee minutes, preserved in the Hull History Centre, reveal a dedicated and talented librarian who led complex building projects and the implementation of one of the first integrated library management systems in this country. The Larkin25 celebrations in Hull, marking the 25th anniversary of his death, brought together all the different aspects of Larkin's life and work in a series of lectures, publications exhibitions and other cultural events, culminating in the installation of a new statue of Larkin at the Hull Paragon Interchange railway station in December 2010.



*The Philip Larkin Statue, Hull Paragon Interchange
Photo: Paul Harrop, licensed under Creative Commons*

THE LARKIN TRAIL

My first stop in Hull on a (yes, rainy) Sunday morning was the tourist office where I picked up some brochures and a Larkin toad fridge magnet. For the main celebrations in the summer a number of colourful fibreglass toads inspired by Larkin poems had been placed round the city. Although the toads were auctioned off in September, several have been retained and can be located with assistance from the tourist office.

Visitors can also follow an official Larkin trail passing buildings, streets, parks and other key locations where Larkin lived, worked and visited or which inspired his poetry. Fortified with a pub lunch, I really enjoyed my walk around the city centre remembering little phrases from the poems describing the 'domes and statues' and the 'large cool store' which is now a branch of Marks and Spencers. The highlight of my afternoon was a visit to the excellent exhibition celebrating Larkin's life at Wilberforce House in Hull's Museum Quarter. Four large glass cases displayed a wonderfully evocative selection of Larkin's personal belongings including books, LP records, his typewriter, some of his own photographs and his bicycle.



Larkin25 exhibition, Wilberforce House, Hull

THE LARKIN ARCHIVE

I was keen to visit the Hull History Centre, a light and airy purpose-built centre housing both the city archives and collections transferred from Hull University. I was prepared with a list of references to the volumes of university library committee minutes stored here, which the staff located very quickly and brought to my desk. After a brief battle with the hi-tech pencil sharpener I spent a very absorbing couple of hours looking through the bound volumes. Larkin remarks to Betjeman in the *Monitor* documentary⁴ that they are 'very good minutes' and indeed they are: quinquennial volumes bound in orange buckram with leather spines and corners, thumb tabs and indexes. I thought that it might be interesting to look back to the 1970s and 1980s to see what was discussed at Larkin's library committee meetings and note whether there were any parallels with our current concerns. Browsing the indexes at the front of each volume, some very familiar themes began to emerge: 'budget cuts'; 'increasing cost of periodi-

cals and foreign books'; 'cancellations exercise'; 'library computer system'; and 'New Library Stages I and II'.



Hull History Centre

One heading from the minutes of December 1973 caught my eye: a special meeting of the library committee to discuss the 'National emergency: library opening'. The early 1970s in Britain was a difficult time of economic slump, high energy prices, rising inflation and increasing unemployment. The committee noted that 'the Pro-Vice Chancellor said that because of the national emergency, heating in the university had been limited to 63 F and although the university was closing over Christmas the Library would open on 27 and 28 December'. The Pro-Vice Chancellor's recommendation was that 'lighting in the Library be kept to a minimum, and that the Library should close at the end of normal daylight, namely 3.30pm'. Thankfully we have not had to take such drastic measures during the current economic difficulties, but it did bring back childhood memories of rationed electricity and walking to school in the dark with no street lights.

I worked through several years of minutes when the major concern at Hull, in common with all university libraries at the time, was the rising cost of periodicals. There were major cancellation exercises in 1974-5 and again in 1983-4. There is evidence in the minutes of a great deal of work and correspondence with the faculties, leading to the cancellation of 778 serial titles and 144 standing orders in the 1970s. Although the sums involved are very different, the painful processes are familiar to all of us who have worked with library budgets in difficult economic times. In 1973 it was noted that 'a memorandum by the Librarian... pointed out that the cost of periodicals taken by the library was increasing at the rate of

15% to 16% annually' and that if action was not taken the proportion of the library grant devoted to current periodical subscriptions, 33% at that time, would rise to 50% by 1975/6. There are many lists of titles and memos requesting information from faculties on their proposed cancellations. Nowadays we tend to record only the decisions and outcomes of discussions, but the detailed Hull minutes tell the full story of concerned individuals doing their best to reach difficult compromises in challenging circumstances. One aspect that would be very familiar to all of us is the different levels of cooperation and compliance from the various faculties; for example in 1975 it is noted that 'one department had refused to propose cancellations unless the Library Committee agreed to cancel all duplicate subscriptions and subscriptions to ephemera' and, in response, 'the Committee deprecated any attempt by individual departments to exact conditions from the Library Committee in return for their collaboration in the present exercise.' I felt that one item from 1974, a typewritten letter from Antony Ford of the Department of Music, still has resonance today as we face the current economic difficulties: 'If the universities do not take the periodicals, who will? It follows that many periodicals must cease publication...Is it not time that a working party, representing the libraries and the major publishers of periodicals, got together to see what could be done to reduce the cost of publication?'

I didn't have enough time on this visit to read in detail the volumes covering the installation of the new Geac computer system, but it was evident that Larkin stepped in to resolve the initial installation problems in 1980/1 to ensure that by May 1982 the system was fully live and delivering the benefits of increased transactions with fewer staff. I would also have liked to read through the files on the building of the new library, which is covered very well in the Andrew Motion biography. I left the archive with a feeling of great respect for the amount of work and care that Larkin had put into his professional life, something that is probably evident to those who knew him but which does not come through in many of the books and articles about his life.

OTHER EVENTS AND COMMEMORATIONS

In October 2010 a collection of Larkin's letters to Monica Jones⁵ was published and there were a number of articles in the British newspapers and magazines commemorating the 25th anniversary of his death. A four-volume CD set of his favourite jazz tracks, Larkin's jazz⁶, appeared in time for

me to take it on my iPod to Hull as the soundtrack to my visit. In a BBC television documentary, Philip Larkin and the Third Woman⁷, broadcast in December, Andrew Motion interviewed Betty Mackereth, Larkin's secretary and companion in later life, who let him see some of the poems he had written for her including the formerly uncollected poem about an 'autumn' relationship, *We met at the end of the party*. Motion also interviewed the actor David Walliams, a Larkin fan who keeps a copy of the poems by his bedside wherever he goes, about his favourite poems for a short programme on BBC Radio 4.

Larkin's poetry is certain to endure, even though his complex life and sometimes controversial views can make it difficult to admire the work separately from the man. For me, a greater understanding of his professional and personal life has helped me to read the poems with new insights and appreciate more deeply the great personal conflicts he faced in his two lives as librarian and poet.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.larkin25.co.uk/index.php>
who keeps
- 2 Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: a writer's life*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003
- 3 'Toads' Philip Larkin, *Collected poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1988
- 4 BBC, Philip Larkin. *Monitor: down Cemetery Road*, 1964. Extracts available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTdDS05x6d0>
- 5 Anthony Thwaite (editor), *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010
- 6 *Larkin's Jazz*, Audio CD Box set, London: Proper Records, 2010
- 7 BBC, *Philip Larkin and the Third Woman*, 2010. Programme page available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wc-qvb>