International English Library



International English Library: A History from 1946–2026







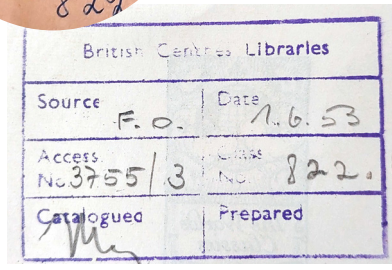






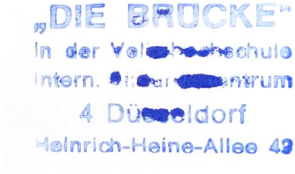


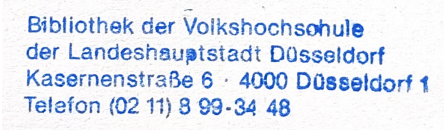
















Stamps and insignias used in library books 1946-2026.

A gift to the people

The origins of the International English Library

In 1946 the British Army Council decided to give the people a gift: a cultural centre that included a library, the purpose of which was to provide the people with the opportunity to re-educate themselves. This library has shown remarkable resilience, and survives to this day, 80 years later. Unlike many of the other libraries that the British Army Council established all over the occupied territories, it is the only one that withstood numerous crises and is now a thriving hub for the international community of the Düsseldorf region. With over 25.000 English-language publications, it is an expertly curated treasure trove for anglophiles. How this library came into being, how it changed and evolved over the decades, and how it overcame its challenges, we will learn in this publication.

The British effort of educational rehabilitation

It is the year 1946, the war has been over for a year, but the aftermath could still be felt in the city of Düsseldorf. There was no government, no police, and many fields such as health care and law were robbed of talented people, as before the war around 23% of doctors and lawyers were Jewish. Germany was divided and occupied, with the British in charge of administrating and rehabilitating the region. The ruination of the city was evident in the housing crisis, as many buildings, including living accommodation, were destroyed in the war. People were living in shelled

out properties, scraping by and going hungry.

This was a time long before multi-media, and the only entertainment people had were the radio, the theatre and the written word—newspapers, magazines, and books. After 11 years of Nazi indoctrination and intellectual starvation, the people were eager to re-educate themselves. During the war, many books were banned and burned, but now people were longing for intellectual exchange after having been exposed to Nazi ideologies for a decade.

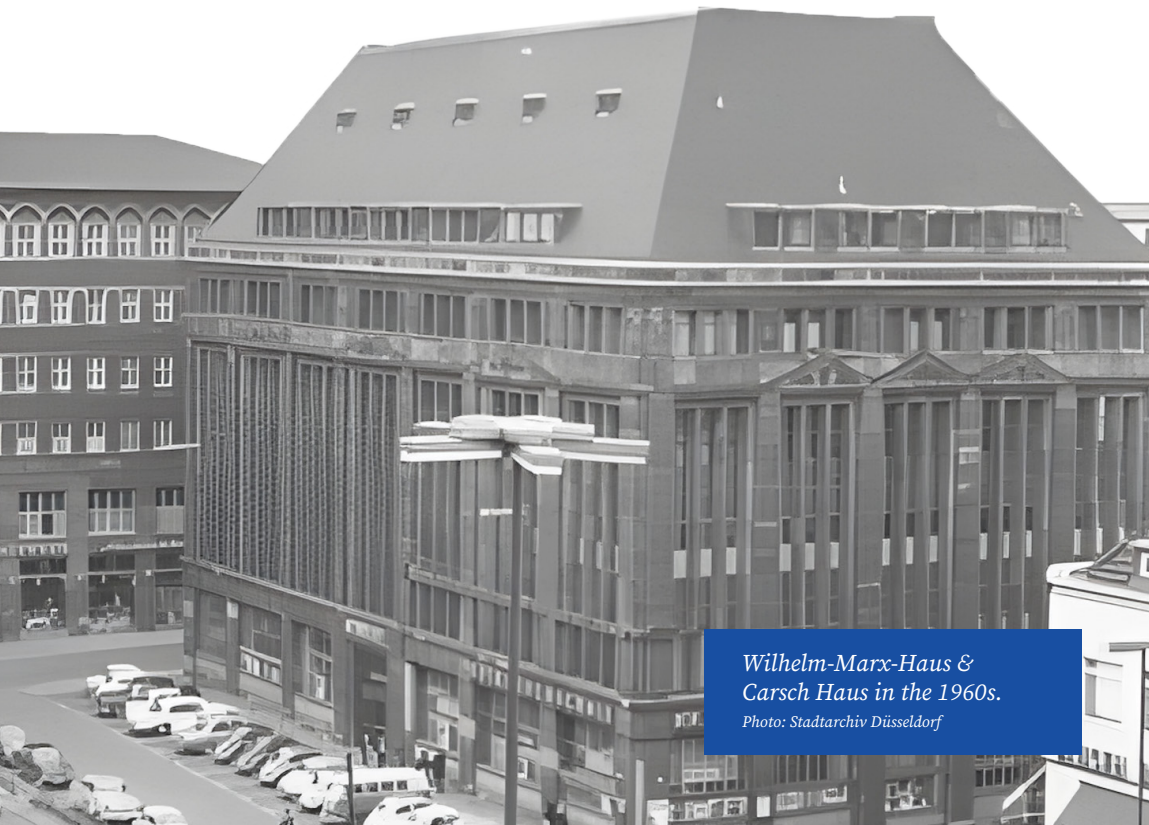
In August of 1945, 14.000 children were ready to go back to school—but there was not enough space for all of them. During the war, 52 schools were completely destroyed, and another 95 heavily damaged. Younger children had to make due with a total of 410 classrooms, where before there were 1600. Space was not the only problem for these children—there was also a shortage of teachers. A lot of younger people were killed in the war, and most of the remaining teachers were older than 50. Of those, over 200 were expelled because they were



too heavily influenced by Nazi propaganda. Finding new teachers would take some time, and they had to go through a one-year learning period.

In 1944, before the war ended, the British Government was already considering how to rehabilitate education in Germany, with the aim to set up a new, healthy education system that reconnected Germany to the outside world. The British consulted professors from Germany, planned for new school materials to be established, and considered how to practically implement a new school system. It was decided to focus on a return to traditional (pre-war) values, meaning the retention of the confessional Volksschule and the academic Gymnasium.

With the end of the war, the British took over the education system. They established basic principles for the democratisation of education, most importantly democratisation through educa-



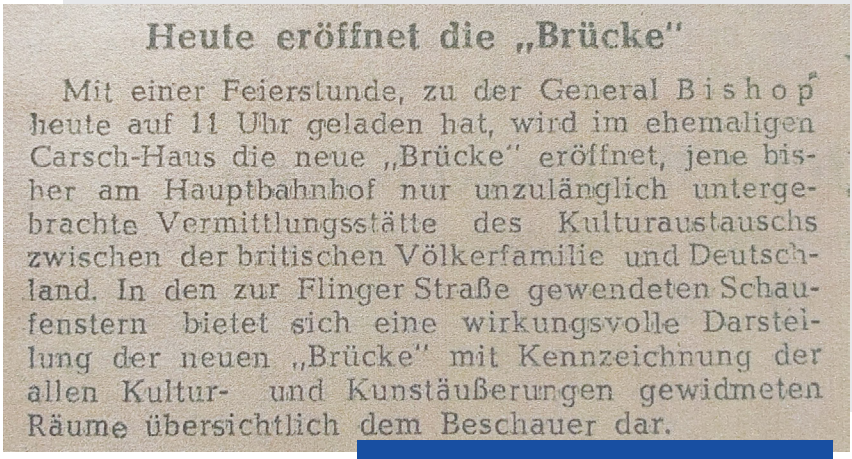
Wilhelm-Marx-Haus & Carsch Haus in the 1960s.
Photo: Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf

tion - “there should be equal educational opportunities for all”. So while children went back to school, adults could also get the opportunity to educate themselves. To realize this ideal, several measures were taken: providing free tuition, free textbooks, and free educational guidance. In practice, educational guidance was given through the establishment of Information Centres across the British Zone, which were named “Die Brücke”.

A bridge to democracy and culture

In the year 1947, a total of 62 Information Centres were established by the British in German towns with a population of 50.000 or more. While most of these were in the British sector, there were also five within the American sector, and one in the French sector. The purpose of these Information Centres was hugely ambitious—to help free Germany from the legacy of Nazi ideology by providing access to objective information, encouraging democratic thinking, and reconnecting people with European and international literature and ideas that were suppressed during the Third Reich. The Centres also introduced British culture, literature, science and arts, creating opportunities for dialogue between former enemies who now had the difficult but essential task of becoming neighbours once again. The name “Die Brücke” was intentionally chosen—bridges connect people who were separated, and allow ideas, cultures and friendships to flow in both directions.

“Die Brücke” in Düsseldorf was originally housed near Hauptbahnhof, but in 1947 the British occupation forces confiscated the former department store Carsch Haus at what is today Heinrich-Heine-Allee with the intent to turn it into an educational and



Heute eröffnet die „Brücke"

Mit einer Feierstunde, zu der General Bishop heute auf 11 Uhr geladen hat, wird im ehemaligen Carsch-Haus die neue „Brücke" eröffnet, jene bisher am Hauptbahnhof nur unzulänglich untergebrachte Vermittlungsstätte des Kulturaustauschs zwischen der britischen Völkerfamilie und Deutschland. In den zur Flinger Straße gewendeten Schaufenstern bietet sich eine wirkungsvolle Darstellung der neuen „Brücke" mit Kennzeichnung der allen Kultur- und Kunstäußerungen gewidmeten Räume übersichtlich dem Beschauer dar.

Düsseldorfer Nachrichten, 11 May 1949.

cultural centre. As the British started preparing Carsch Haus, the people of Düsseldorf, who were cut off from the foreign press and had their own shortages of newsprint, were finally back on track to regain their city's cultural reputation as a leading city in art, music and theatre.

Two years later, in 1949, the Information Centre "Die Brücke" was finally opened to the public in Carsch Haus. The library, with a view of Flinger Straße in the heart of the Old Town, featured a reading room with seating for 200 people, an extensive collection of British magazines, periodicals, and technical journals, and approximately 7.000 British books. To complement this generous space, the building also had a radio room, social rooms, as well as a concert and lecture hall with the capacity to host 300 people. Within the next three years, over 2720 events would be staged here, attended by half a million people.

"Die Brücke" became a well known institution and was immensely popular among locals and visitors alike. As Günter Grass wrote in his book "Die Blechtrommel" (The Tin Drum)—

"... in those years I educated myself almost free of cost together with thousands wanting to catch up and educate themselves, took courses in the VHS and became a regular in the British Centre called "Die Brücke"."

In just a few years, "Die Brücke" achieved exactly what its name intended: it became a bridge to democracy and culture.

Günter Grass' Biography "Peeling the Onion", and his novel "The Tin Drum" both mention "Die Brücke".



Sovereignty and strong leadership

The following seven years, the Information Centre and its library continued to be run by the British occupation forces in Carsch Haus. However, in 1950 management changed and the Information Centres were being funded by the British government rather than through occupation costs, which brought about rapid changes and cutbacks. As a result, by the time the Federal Republic of Germany regained full sovereignty in the year 1955, only 10 Information Centres remained in Germany, with all others—seemingly having achieved their purpose—being closed down. Simultaneously, competition emerged from other cultural institutions, and interest in the Information Centres declined.

With sovereignty, the requisition of Carsch Haus ended, and the British urged the German authorities to take on more responsibility. Consequently, "Die Brücke" in Düsseldorf was jointly run by the city and the British, the building was renamed "Anglo-German Cultural Centre Die Brücke" and had both a German and a British director.

One of these directors was Frau Dr. M. von Müller, who took over leadership of "Die Brücke" already several years before sovereignty in 1951. During her leadership, she aimed to keep the Anglo-German Cultural Centre a dedicated institution with open doors. She worked passionately to build bridges between nations and supported many intercultural projects.

However, in the late 1950s, "Die Brücke" faced financial scrutiny. As chronicled in a newspaper article from 1959 ("Leere Säle der 'Brücke' kosten den Bürger viel Geld"), attendance at "Die Brücke" was low, and the author questioned whether the approx-



Photo from Rheinische Post Article 'Ein Fundament der "Brücke"', 4th October 1961.

imately 90.000 DM spent annually on the institution still brought value to the community. They suggested that perhaps the rooms should be allocated to the Volkshochschule (Adult Education Centre) or Kammerspiele theatre instead.

Despite financial setbacks, Dr. von Müller's leadership of "Die Brücke" was highly regarded in Düsseldorf, as evident in an article from 1961 about her departure (Ein Fundament der "Brücke")—after ten years of service, she departed Düsseldorf in 1961 to take on a position in Münster, where her husband had been based for the past two years. Her successor was Dr. Herbert Herring, who previously was the director of the Volkshochschule Büderich.

The farewell celebration honoured Dr. von Müller's decade-long contribution as having "bridged between peoples" and having built foundations through personal dedication beyond her official duties. She received praise from several collaborators and

officials, emphasizing that all efforts of "Die Brücke" would not have been imaginable without her leadership.

Relocation challenges

Several years into the leadership of Dr. Herring, "Die Brücke" went through another administrative change: the International Education Centre would now be incorporated into the Volkshochschule Düsseldorf. This was announced in 1969, at the farewell party of Dr. Herbert Herring, during which he also confirmed that his successor would be the VHS director Dr. Werner. Dr. Werner was highly regarded for being a creative young man, who through his passionate improvements, had recently succeeded in gaining significant growth in attendance at the VHS. "Die Brücke" subsequently became a department of the VHS, and was renamed once again to "Internationales Bildungswerk Die Brücke".

The library operated as such during much of the 1970s, when it was also colloquially known as the VHS-Bibliothek or Fremdsprachenbibliothek (FSB). The end of this decade brought a new challenge to the library though; the relocation of the Carsch Haus in 1979 to make space for an underground railway station. While the Carsch Haus was being meticulously deconstructed stone by stone, the library moved into a temporary location near Hauptbahnhof. This move was a cause of decline the library would undergo through the next two decades, as this temporary location was not only difficult to find (as it was on an upper floor with no indication on the ground floor), but it was also dark, gloomy and claustrophobic, making the experience of spending time at the library rather dreary. This atmosphere contributed strongly to the



Magazine cover "Die Brücke" from 1999. The international education centre was operated by the VHS.

decrease of visitors to the library.

The library stayed in this location for the five years it took to reconstruct the Carsch Haus, 23 metres from its original location. However, once construction finished, the library did not move back into its historic location in Carsch Haus. Instead, in 1984, it moved into a newly built extension of the Wilhelm Marx Haus across the road from Carsch Haus at Kasernenstraße 6. This new building was given the well-established name "Die Brücke".

The library was now officially being rebranded from a specialist English library into a "Lern- und Trainings Zentrum" (LUTZ for short). During this time, director of the English department of the VHS Dr. Erika Herzog initiated an English learning centre in the library, in which VHS students were able to listen to the classroom books and other texts from cassettes—a novelty, since until then teaching books had not had audio material. Later, this was extended by also adding the facilities to watch English videos in the library.

After reopening at Kasernenstraße in 1984, the library was managed by three employed librarians, joined in 1985 by Britta Zangen. During her 7-year tenure as librarian, Zangen also took over management of the library in 1987 and with strong support of her colleagues breathed new life into the sleepy library, which had suffered tremendously from the five years of being housed in the dreary facilities near Hauptbahnhof. To revitalize the library, she facilitated a number of new projects, such as introducing talks by well-known British writers and poets in cooperation with the British Council.

While back in its Carsch Haus location, the library had often

organized events. This stopped during the 5 years of temporary relocation. Zangen, who had a degree in English Studies, brought back this tradition in an effort to popularize the library and make it known among its target audience—which shifted to English-speaking people of all backgrounds, where previously there was more of a focus on British people and German English-speakers due to the library's former affiliation with the British.



The building at Kasernenstraße bearing the name "Die Brücke".
Photo: Barbara Schmeichel

The new location at Kasernenstraße had a similar issue as the temporary one, in that it was on the 4th floor with little indication of its existence at street level. Passers-by rarely noticed it, and the only helpful aspect was that there were VHS teaching rooms in the same building. At the same time, the library was treated as the odd one out at the VHS, with budgets being cut constantly. No money meant no new books, no magazines and newspapers. People stopped coming because there was little to offer. Britta Zangen tried to counter this trend by organizing events such as author readings, exhibitions and taking part in external events such as the Bücherbummel on the Kö. Regardless of her and her colleagues' efforts, the VHS kept cutting the budget of the library, and before her departure in 1992, she prophesied to the head of the VHS, Dr. Hicken: "If you keep cutting funds, people will stop coming." She immediately quit her job when he cut costs yet again.

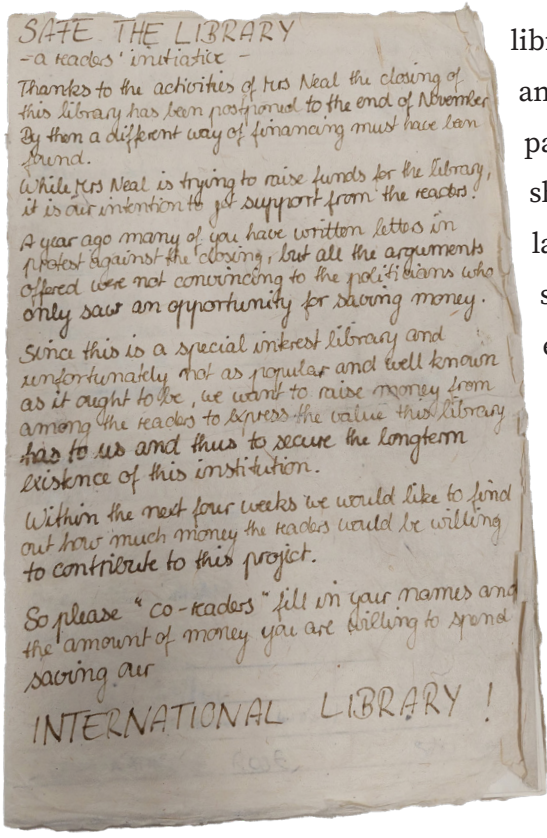
Closure and rescue

While the library continued to operate for another 7 years throughout the 1990s, the effects of the continual cost cutting led the library to its seemingly inevitable demise. With very few new books, magazines and newspapers on offer, patrons stopped frequenting the library.

In 1998, the city council of Düsseldorf hired a firm of consultants to find opportunities for cost-cutting measures. This firm combed through all the services offered by the city, including the Volkshochschule, to define which of these were obligatory, legally binding, and which were voluntary services. Unfortunately, the library in "Die Brücke" was categorized as a voluntary service, rendering it a dispensable candidate to save taxpayer money of about 90.000 DM on personnel costs.

The threat of closure loomed over the library, and came to its culmination in 1998, when it was announced that the library would close for the public on 11 September 1998. SPD agreed to the closure under the condition that the books would continue to be publicly available. CDU opposed the closure, arguing that the institution was an important symbol for internationality. As the majority voted for closure, the library was to vacate the premises by the 1st of January 1999. The monumental task of finding new homes for 30.000 books and media was given to Dr. Martin Menges, the director of the LUTZ. He lamented the closure of the library, and empathized with the patrons of the library.

At the time, the library had 7500 active patrons. One of these patrons, the Englishwoman Elizabeth 'Liz' Neill, refused to accept the impending closure of the library. She proposed increasing the



SAVE THE LIBRARY
-a readers' initiative -

Thanks to the activities of Mrs Neal the closing of this library has been postponed to the end of November. By then a different way of financing must have been found.

While Mrs Neal is trying to raise funds for the library, it is our intention to get support from the readers!

A year ago many of you have written letters in protest against the closing, but all the arguments offered were not convincing to the politicians who only saw an opportunity for saving money.

Since this is a special interest library and unfortunately not as popular and well known as it ought to be, we want to raise money from among the readers to express the value this library has to us and thus to secure the longterm existence of this institution.

Within the next four weeks we would like to find out how much money the readers would be willing to contribute to this project.

So please "co-readers" fill in your names and the amount of money you are willing to spend saving our

INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY !

library membership fees, and contacted British companies asking for sponsorships for the library. She launched a campaign to save the library, and her efforts were noticed by the city. The library got a last respite: if enough sponsors could be found, the library would continue to operate. Liz wrote countless letters and gathered 102 supporters for her campaign. By autumn of 1998, she successfully convinced politicians to give the library a second chance, and recruited sponsors such as British Steel, P&O Stena Line, Rover, and ICI Lacke und Farben. Over the course of six weeks, her campaign secured 30.000 DM in written donation commitments. While SPD tenaciously argued for cost-cutting, CDU demanded to postpone the decision to close the library within half a year with support from the Greens.

Friends of the International Library e.V. in der BRÜCKE

In late 1998, Liz formalised her campaign by establishing the association "Friends of the International Library e.V. in der

BRÜCKE", with her 102 supporters of various nationalities joining as members. Among the supporters was also Helmut Cornelius, a former district representative, whose wife, an American who had come to Düsseldorf in 1956, was a lifelong library patron. Cornelius provided legal oversight for the association, and assisted in negotiations. Committed to preserving the library, the association held crucial talks with politicians from all factions, as well as with administrative officials, on 21 December 1998.



Stadt übergibt Fremdsprachenbibliothek

Einen guten Weg in der letzten Minute gefunden

Von ANDREA MILITZER

Charles Dickens hat Glück. Er muß nicht umziehen. Eigentlich sollten seine Schmöker längst in einer Umzugskiste liegen. Jetzt haben viele englischsprachige Bücher einen gesicherten Platz in der Fremdsprachenbibliothek (FSB) in der „Brücke" an der Kasernenstraße.

„Beachtlicher Vorgang"

Gestern hat der Förderverein „Friends of the International Library" die Bibliothek von der Stadt übernommen. „Wir haben es hier mit einem beachtlichen Vorgang zu tun", sagte Kulturdezernent Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff. „Public-Private-Partnership" im besten Sinne und ein guter Weg in letzter Minute, so der Dezernent. Nachdem die Politiker im Rat bei den Haushaltsberatungen für 1998 mit einer Mehrheit von SPD und Grünen die Schließung beschlossen hatten, kämpfte die Engländerin Elizabeth Neill um den Erhalt.

Mit Erfolg. Seit Herbst vergangenen Jahres hat sie 102 Menschen für den Förderverein gewonnen, zahlreiche Sponsoren und auch die Politiker aller Fraktionen überzeugt. Nun belasten die Kosten nicht mehr das Stadtsäckel, sondern werden vom Förderverein aufgebracht.

Mit dem Geld der Sponsoren British Steel und P&O Stena Line sowie privaten Spenden soll der Fortbestand der Bibliothek ermöglicht werden. Der Vertrag des Vereins mit der Stadt über mietfreie Nutzung läuft unbefristet, läßt jeder Seite aber eine Kündigungsfrist von einem halben Jahr. Für den Übergang von sechs Monaten stellt die Stadt eine Mitarbeiterin, dann muß der Verein das Personal selbst finanzieren. „Wir suchen eine Bibliothekarin, 20 Helfer übernehmen Dienste während der Öffnungszeiten", berichtet sie.

Profis aus Amerika helfen

„Kultur ist auch eine Aufgabe der Bürger. Das bedeutet nicht den Rückzug der Kommunen, sondern eine Mitträgerschaft aller Düsseldorfer", sagt der Kulturdezernent. In den kommenden Wochen räumen Profis in der Bibliothek auf: Marilyn Lutzke und Gerhard Steineke. Beide haben an amerikanischen Universitäten Bibliotheken verwaltet und werden ehrenamtlich prüfen, welche neuen Bücher und Videos notwendig sind, welche ausrangiert werden können. „In gut einem Monat wollen wir dann auch zusätzlich samstags öffnen, damit Familien gemeinsam herkommen können", sagt Elizabeth Neill zu den Plänen.

Kulturdezernent Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff übergab die Fremdsprachenbibliothek an Elizabeth Neill, Vorsitzende des Fördervereins. RP-Foto: Horn

Rheinische Post article from 2nd Feb 1999 about the successful rescue of the Library.

The unthinkable happened: the library's future was saved—for now. Among the administrative officials participating was head of the cultural department, Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff, who was predisposed to

saving the library in whatever form possible, and who initiated the idea for a private-public partnership. With his support, Liz and the Friends association prevented the immediate closure of the library. Subsequently, Liz and Grosse-Brockhoff signed a contract, transferring the custody of the library from the city and the VHS to the Friends association. Liz's campaign began as an effort to raise funds for the city to continue its operation of the library, but instead, in February 1999, the city gave the complete responsibility of the library over to the "Friends of the International Library e.V. in der BRÜCKE" association, giving them a 6-month period to prove they were able to continue to run the library. Grosse-Brockhoff praised this arrangement and commended the association not only for raising money but for investing genuine volunteer labor to keep the institution alive.

How do you run a library?

Liz originally intended to raise money for the city to keep running the library, but was now handed over the management in order to prove that the Friends association was capable of running a library within six months. This presented them with a formidable challenge, since none of the association's members were librarians or had any experience in how to run a library. Thankfully, one of the association's members summoned help: Peter Lutsker invited his mother Marilyn for a one week working visit to Düsseldorf from the USA. She had previously been the director of the City University of New York's library system, and was called out of retirement to help. She conducted a thorough review of the library's collection at the time—which numbered over 20.000 books and other media, and many audio cassettes in English, Ger-



The woman who saved the library

Elizabeth 'Liz' Neill was born in England in 1953 and came to Germany in 1976, where she operated a pub in Krefeld. In 1991, she settled permanently in Düsseldorf.

She was the driving force behind saving the library and officially took over leadership, serving as the first chairperson of the Friends of the International Library e.V. for nearly 18 years until January 2016.

Liz was recognized for her outstanding service to British culture abroad on 11 May 2011, when she was awarded the Member of the British Empire (MBE) honor by Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace.

Liz passed away on May 21, 2017 after a brave battle with ALS at the age of 64, and was laid to rest in England. She is remembered as a charismatic leader whose dedication transformed a threatened institution into a thriving international cultural resource.

Liz Neill in 2011, wearing her MBE.
Photo: Barbara Schmeichel

man, French, and Spanish. She assessed which materials needed to be culled, and proposed new acquisitions. Another American library administration expert, Gerhard Steinecke, also assisted in this evaluation process.

The city continued to finance one staff member for the library during the six-month probation period, but after this period expired, the association would need to fund personnel independently. Quickly, the volunteer effort expanded, and the library grew to having about 30 active volunteers from diverse nationalities, splitting amongst themselves the various responsibilities that came with running a library. Their efforts were successful and the city



Volunteers in the library at Kasernenstraße in 2004.
Photo: Friends of the International Library e.V.



The International English Library at Kasernenstraße in 2005.
Photo: Roswitha Schirmer

agreed to permanently hand over the library to the Friends association.

The Friends of the International Library were supported by several people of note during this time, among them Dr. Martin Menges from the VHS who assisted the library during the transition process and Prof. Dr. Albert-Reiner Glaap OBE, who became one of the first members of the advisory board (Beirat) of the association and remained so for many years.

Rejuvenation

Under the leadership of chairperson Liz Neill, the association began to renovate and improve the library. During summer 1999, twelve volunteers helped cleaning the rug, painting the walls and most importantly, updating the library's collection. New arrivals included new books, English-language audio materials, but also an entirely new Children's Corner.

The Children's Corner was an initiative by Patricia 'Pat' Grossmann, one of the first volunteers who joined after Liz founded the friends association. Together they wanted to make the library a

more family-friendly space. Previously, the library only had one single shelf of relatively outdated children's books, mostly classics such as Alice in Wonderland. These were not in a good condition, as they were not only old, but also located next to a window that was exposed to a lot of exhaust emissions. Liz and Pat got sponsors to donate new shelving for the Children's Corner, and they procured new books. The Children's Corner has since grown into an integral part of the library, further solidified in 2006, when Melanie 'Mel' Schuth initiated the "Tales for Tots" group, a weekly group for parents with children ages 12-24 months, where Mel reads stories from the library's collection of picture books.

Other improvements that followed soon after were internet access and extended opening hours, with plans to also open the library on Saturdays especially for families. The reading room in the back of the library was stocked with English, German and American newspapers and magazines, and games of chess, scrabble and backgammon were provided.

The library's collection of video material was also extended during that time. When the association took over, the library had only roughly 80 VHS videos. Under the stewardship of volunteer Barbara Schmeichel this collection grew to several thousand, and as DVDs became more popular, VHS tapes were phased out and increasingly replaced by DVDs starting in 2001.

Due to the association's efforts of rejuvenating the library, it returned to its historical function as being a cultural centre, as it hosted exhibitions, crafting workshops, open days, and cross-cultural events for adults and children.

One of the earliest events that was hosted were the "Relax in



The IEL at Bücherbummel auf der Kö 2006.
Photo: Roswitha Schirmer

English" Yoga classes by yoga teacher Sonia Veldhuizen. Originally Sonia suggested hosting yoga as a Friday evening wellness initiative to give back to the volunteers of the library. This quickly developed into a Tuesday evening class that was open to patrons as well, and several years later an additional Wednesday morning class started.

Shortly after the Friends association took over, volunteers Pat Grossmann and Sheila Brass also initiated recurring Book Sales. These were originally quite small, but grew over time into an integral part of the library's annual calendar. During the 2000s, there were also raffles with prizes donated by sponsors, primarily British companies. As sponsorships became fewer, prizes stopped and the Book Sales were now focused on affordable books and homemade refreshments.

Beyond the walls of Kasernenstraße, the Friends association also participated in cultural events in Düsseldorf, such as returning to the Bücherbummel on the Kö after a long absence (in a

red double-decker London bus), and having stands at the Shakespeare Festival in Neuss, and at the Zakk Street Festival.

The association established a financial model to finance the library through membership fees of 20 DM annually for its approximately 1.500 patrons, supplemented by donations and sponsorships from local businesses, corporations, families and individuals. This money was primarily used to purchase new books and media, but a long-term goal of the association was also the digitalisation of the catalogue.

Digitalisation

Though digital catalogues were already in use in public libraries as early as the 1970s and 1980s, this aspect was one of the things the VHS decided to cut costs on. Hence, the cataloguing at the International English Library was still done manually by the time the Friends association took over. It was a slow process, with pockets and cards inside the books, and card indexes for titles, authors and keywords in special cupboards with labelled drawers. It was not possible to do a computer search for titles in the library's collection, but patrons had to rely on going manually through the drawers in order to find a book.

In 2008, the volunteers running the library finally started the long process of recording the library's entire collection in a software called Alice for Windows. This was a PC-based system running locally on computers, which required a physical server within the library. A software consultant was hired to help set up the records, and under the supervision of volunteers Susan Jones and Sheila Brass, volunteers were trained to enter data into Alice. They originally estimated it would take approximately five years

to digitalize the entire collection of the library. Enough volunteers signed up to finish in less than two years, with a strict schedule of 3 volunteers working on it for 3 hours a day and altogether cataloguing about 120 books per day. The process started in late 2008, and was finished in January 2010. Finally, in May 2010, the library started to operate digitally.

Several years later, in around 2016, the catalogue was migrated from Alice to a web-based catalogue system called Koha. The main motivation for the move away from Alice were the problems caused by the server going down on a regular basis. Alice would stop working multiple times per month and no one could find or check out books until the server could be fixed. Alice was also not the ideal software for the library, as it was originally designed for schools before the internet existed. The software was also discontinued at that time, and migrating to the successor software would have been very costly.

Koha is a global open source software project with many volunteer contributors which has several advantages, primarily that it is free and does not require licenses, and that it can be accessed from any computer via web browser instead of needing to install special software. Volunteers Adam and Kendra Goforth took on the task of migrating from Alice to Koha in April 2016, doing the bulk of the migration during the summer break in August, when the library was closed for four weeks. While Adam took over the migration process, Kendra worked on the catalogue and trained the volunteers in using Koha. Eventually, Alice was shut down and Koha became operational at the beginning of September 2016.

18 months without a library

Having finally caught up to the digital age, the library faced its next challenge in the year 2020—a global pandemic. Shortly before the pandemic broke out, the IEL's committee underwent changes—chair Michael Tauschhuber, who was elected as Liz Neill's successor to the position of chair in 2016, resigned the weekend of the lockdown. Melanie Schuth, having just been elected as vice chair, became acting chair and was thrown in the deep end, confronted with a crisis.

The committee held an emergency meeting as the lockdown was announced, and decided to shut down the library in compliance with lockdown regulations in March 2020. This put the library on a fast track for digitalisation of a different type—social media and online events. The library's Instagram and Facebook accounts became an important mode of communication, and



During Covid, the library's bi-annual Book Sale was held outdoors.
Photo: Barbara Schmeichel

most of the library's established events became digital, such as Tales for Tots, Relax in English and the IEL Book Club. Volunteers initiated new online events to bridge the gap, such as Library Voices and the Book Lovers' Corner (some of these online events continue until the present as online events, and are still being joined by former patrons and volunteers who moved back to their home countries—India, Canada, the US and other places around the world).

Two months later, in May 2020, the library reached out to their affiliates at the Stadtbibliothek Düsseldorf to collaborate on establishing social distancing practices for possibly reopening. This brought the library even further into the digital age, as card and online payment methods were established, as well as a click and collect operation for patrons to check out books and media while complying with social distancing regulations.

But just as the library found a way to navigate the pandemic, the next challenge presented itself in June 2020: the library received its six month notice from the city that they would have to vacate the premises at Kasernenstraße. After 37 years in the building bearing the name "Die Brücke", the city of Düsseldorf decided to sell this building, forcing the library to move out, with the prospect of being without premises for a while.

The Friends association used the time to re-organise itself by introducing a set of subcommittees, such as for schools, social media, events, and volunteer engagement. Their purpose was to establish strategic projects that would keep the library and its community engaged while being without physical premises.

This phase finally saw the launch of the Inter-School Debate

Program, which had been in the works for some time. It has since grown to one of the library's most prestigious annual events, with many schools taking part, and the finale being held each year in Düsseldorf's Rathaus.

Another fruitful partnership was initiated in March 2021, when committee member Jynon Hibbard established Metropolitan Library Services in Oklahoma, USA as an official partner of the International English Library. This allowed sharing of online events during the pandemic, as well as joint projects and talks.

March 2021 also saw the end of the library in its premises at "Die Brücke" in Kasernenstraße. Moving the library's collection was a logistical challenge, and to ease the load, patrons were encouraged to check out as many books as possible in the lead up to the move to keep until reopening. Most books went into storage.

From April 2021 until April 2022, the city administration provided the association with a small office in the basement of one of the city's administration buildings, which was used as a base of operations while the library



Students from Görres-Gymnasium are the Winners of the first Inter-School Debate in 2021 (pictured with library volunteer Julia Strohmeyer).
Photo: Barbara Schmeichel

was without premises. This housed a small improvised studio for online events, and served as a repository for media that were being returned by patrons leaving town. Regular social events were being organized (online and offline) to keep the community engaged.

While the original plan was for the library to reopen in its new premises at Mecumstraße in January 2022, this was delayed further primarily by complications in construction. Due to Covid-related supply chain problems, the necessary renovations, and with it the reopening of the library, had to be postponed again and again for several months.

A new beginning

After 18 months without physical premises, the library finally reopened its doors at Mecumstraße 10 in Bilk on 2nd May 2022. This date was a "soft opening" for association members, volunteers, and valued friends and partners. One week later, on 9th May, the official ceremonial opening took place and was attended by HM Consul-General Mr. Rafe Courage, and Joyce Fuhrmann representing the British Women's Club.

The new location was well received and brought with it many improvements that were introduced during the closure, such as electronic payment facilities, online membership renewal, and more streamlined volunteer recruitment processes. The library found its feet fast, and saw a growing number of patrons as well as volunteers, eager to see the return of a valued third space for the international community of Düsseldorf.

The library experienced a renaissance, and in 2023, the Inter-School Debating Programme was fortunate to be included



Moving into the new location at Mecumstraße.
Photo: Melanie Schuth

as an official element of the Invictus Games Düsseldorf 2023. The affiliation with the military aspect of the games inspired the 2023 debate topics, and echoed the debates around the original Information Centre set up by the British military in 1947. The library also established official partnerships in the form of Memorandums of Understanding with Görres-Gymnasium and International School Düsseldorf during the following years.

In 2025, the library's number of patrons and volunteers had grown to such an extent that new opening hours were warranted; the library now also added Sunday opening hours to its schedule, which were very well received especially by families.

In its new location, the library hosts many events, old and new alike. Aside from the library's own events that have been around since the early days of the Friends association—such as Relax in English, the bi-annual Book Sales, children's events such as Tales for Tots, and the library's own Book Club established in 2016, the library now hosts a variety of events in collaboration with external groups or individuals. It is now host to several different book clubs, several events for children, a creative writing group, several table top roleplaying events, and a variety of other special and recurring events for and by the international community of Düsseldorf.

From Library to Third Space

The library has withstood numerous challenges over its 80 years, and is today the only institution of the post-war Information Centres left in Germany. It has gone through many transformations over these decades, and its biggest crisis has perhaps been its biggest blessing. By maintaining the library for over 27 years, the Friends of the International Library have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Despite continued reliance on sponsors and public funding, they preserve the institution's founding spirit as a gift to the people to this day—a friendly, interesting, and informative space where visitors can enjoy reading, relax quietly, or simply spend leisure time in a welcoming environment.

What makes this achievement particularly special is that the library operates entirely through volunteer dedication, transforming what could have become a casualty of municipal austerity into a thriving example of citizen-led cultural preservation and a valued third space for a growing international community. 80 years on, the International English Library remains true to its original purpose: building bridges through books, language, and ideas. What began as a post-war initiative to reconnect cultures has grown into a lively, international community shaped by generations of readers. The world has changed enormously since 1946, but the need for places where people can meet, learn, listen and see the world from another perspective has not. As the library looks to the years ahead, its next chapter is not simply about preserving the past, but about opening new doors—to new readers, new ideas, new partnerships and new generations. The bridge, in other words, is still very much being built. ■



The library at Mecumstraße in 2025.
Photo: Marie Engemann

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The coffee corner at the library's bi-annual book sale with homemade refreshments by library volunteers.
Photo: Marie Engemann

This booklet tells the story of institution now known as the International English Library, which originated as a part of the Anglo-German Information Centres established by the British after the war. It had many names throughout the decades; British Centre Library, Anglo-German Centre "Die Brücke", Internationales Bildungswerk "Die Brücke", Bibliothek der Volkshochschule DIE BRÜCKE, Fremdsprachenbibliothek, International Library and is today known as the International English Library.