

History of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute Library

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The Institute was founded in 1832 in a small room at the bottom of Manchester Road in Bradford over the Oddfellows Arms.

One of the most interesting recorded speeches given by one of my predecessors, the Reverend James Ackworth, MA, the second president, was on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of the first purpose-built building in 1839. After referring to the spaciousness and facilities of the building he said: he hoped "that the people of Bradford even in the humblest walks of life would find time, after the unavoidable physical toil, to use a small share of their hard earned earnings in pursuit of culture and learning and not in the haunts of intemperance, dissipation, obscenity and vice". Reading his speech today many of his remarks seem patronizing, sanctimonious and narrow-minded, but in his day he was probably considered a dangerously liberal thinker. He said in another part of his speech that he stood up against those who were prejudiced against certain portions of society gaining knowledge: "to stop the spread of intellectual light was impossible". However, like many in his day he worried about where widespread education would lead: "the problem to consider was how to prevent the mind from abusing its newly acquired freedom and converting a blessing into a curse". I sometimes wonder what he would have felt today.

The history of the Mechanics' Institute in Bradford is very similar to that of many voluntary organizations which were formed by a group of dedicated individuals to meet a pressing need in society. They pioneered the work with very inadequate facilities, struggled hard and worked often in the face of indifference and sometimes disapproval and occasionally downright hostility to raise the money to provide buildings and facilities, often taking personal financial risks to get projects off the ground until, finally, when they were established, respectable and thriving, their function was taken over first by local and later by central government.

In reality it was a triumph; the object had been achieved but it left the institutions with a crisis of identity; they were left with the institutions, the buildings and the funds, but no longer the pressing need. This is the story of our Mechanics' Institute which pioneered the work of adult education in Bradford – particularly for the skilled working class. This took three forms:

- (1) education classes;
- (2) public lectures; and
- (3) library facilities.

Probably the most important were the education classes. The Mechanics' Institutes were formed in the early part of the nineteenth century to teach engineers chemistry, mechanical engineering, philosophy and science. Of course, 150 years ago most artisans could not even read, so they had to be taught to read and write.

In 1868, 368 people learned to write and do simple sums and 124 learned to read. But there were also classes in arithmetic, algebra, geometry, drawing and music. So early activities were both cultural and educational. In all, 42,000 pupils attended classes in just over 70 years. Many people owed their education and advancement to the Bradford Mechanics' Institute.

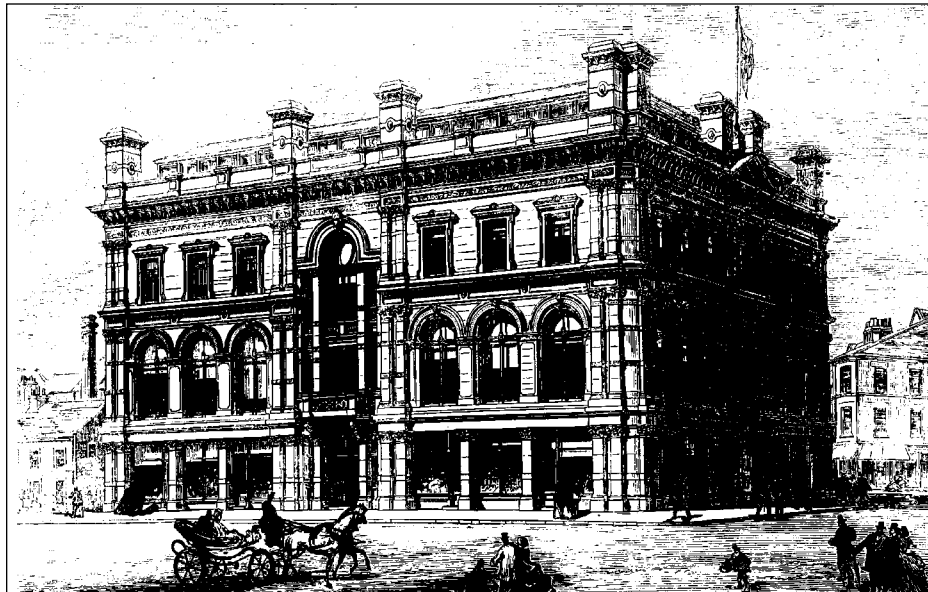
However, the end was soon in sight. Between 1870 and 1902 basic education passed into public hands. In 1904 there was a sad but historic meeting between the officers of the Mechanics' Institute and the local council when it was agreed that the Mechanics' Institute should give up management of its classes to the local authority. Finally a special meeting on 29 August 1904 confirmed the agreement, sold the apparatus and sanctioned the cessation of the scholastic function of the Institute. It was the end of an era.

The second aspect of the education policy was the public lectures held in the large lecture hall. These varied from the serious to the hilarious and included many eminent people: Hilaire Belloc, Conan Doyle, G.K. Chesterton, Amy Johnson, Hugh Walpole, John Ruskin, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jerome K. Jerome. George Bernard Shaw declined to speak, but he acknowledged Bradford as a pioneer town for education. William Miles could recite the whole plot of a Dickens or Scott novel. These famous literary people and public figures needed a forum, the Mechanics' Institute provided magnificent facilities, the large lecture theatre had seats for 1,500 and the people of Bradford benefited. But again the end was in sight: the advent of radio and later television provided an even wider forum for the literary giants and entertainers. Lectures ceased with the outbreak of the War and never resumed.

The third aspect of education was the provision of library facilities which we have inherited today. The issue of books started in 1832 when the library had 800 volumes of "serious works". When the foundation stone was laid in 1839 my predecessor reported in his speech: "Books of every imaginable topic of interest were being multiplied to an incredible extent and the opportunity of possessing them was being placed within the reach of all." By 1908 the library had 26,439 volumes. In the early stages they were all serious works but from about 1871 fiction was introduced, but only very cautiously. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* was considered morally unsound and it took eight years before it was purchased.

The library is still going strong, much smaller now with 260 members and 13,500 books. The library alone of the three activities has survived but even then not without serious competition from the local authority. In 1872 the first municipal library was opened in Bradford and in 1967 a magnificent new library was opened, said at the time to be one of the largest in western Europe housing some 300,000 books. In the circumstances, with this competition from a free public library, how has our library survived? Mainly by charging a minimal subscription to our members and living on capital built up so painfully by our predecessors to provide the educational and cultural needs of the people of Bradford.

At the beginning, 155 years ago, £3,600 was needed for the first building. They commissioned it with only £1,500 in the kitty and my predecessor made an impassioned plea to the “possessors of affluence” to clear the heavy debt, which they did. By 1866 increased facilities were required. Funds were raised and a magnificent building was erected at a cost of £36,000. In 1972 that building was compulsorily acquired by Bradford Corporation for £225,000. Out of that money we purchased our present premises and invested the balance. So we survive by providing library facilities out of the funds created many years ago – not out of our members’ subscriptions which contribute only a small amount to our expenditure. Sometimes in an emergency we dip into our capital. Up to a few years ago we were going down steadily year by year and I was expecting to be back in a room over a pub in Manchester Road again before the end of the century. However, with a new librarian and new blood on the committee, we seem to have taken on a new lease of life and things are now set fair.



The Bradford
Mechanics' Institute
building, opened in
1871

But who benefits now from this wealth toiled for and risked for so many years ago? Our members are mainly of an older age group; almost half are pensioners, probably mainly middle-class, a fair proportion of academics and professionals, a far cry from the skilled working classes, the engineers and the people from the humblest walks of life with their lives of unavoidable toil. Are we betraying our trust using money so hard earned to subsidize our present members? It does concern me occasionally, but only very occasionally. Mostly I worry about leaking roofs, the lift breaking down and repairs to the building.

On reflection I think our forefathers worked hard, raised funds, took risks to provide education, lectures and a library for everyone who wished to benefit. When local government and the state eventually undertook this responsibility, their objective had been achieved. Bradford University and the new Central Library are their epitaphs, the tangible symbols of their efforts, not our small library. I think they would be much more concerned about the use modern society makes of education for all – the tabloid press, the worst aspects of television, the lurid paperbacks. This would trouble them far more than the way we utilize their hard-earned fund. Would my predecessor James Ackworth feel “the minds of the many were abusing the newly acquired freedom of education for all and converting a blessing into a curse”? I think not; freedom is freedom. I think they would be pleased we keep the library going, that the name of the Mechanics’ Institute lives on, and that occasionally someone like me stands up and tells their story.