

The Bradford Mechanics' Institute Library

Abstract:

The Bradford Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1832 to satisfy the demand for education in this fast growing textile town. In 1870 the Institute, with some 2000 members, moved into an imposing building opposite the Town Hall where over 30 subjects were taught and a library was formed. These classes led to the foundation of the Bradford Technical College in the 1980's. After the Education Acts of 1870 and 1902 made the local authority responsible for both further and elementary education the Institute's education classes ended but the well-established library remained and continued throughout the 1900's albeit in smaller premises. At present the library has over 14000 books and a solid core of some 300 members and is also flourishing as a study centre for local history, the Brontes, poetry, gardening and bridge and its World War I group has published two books. We are proud to have had a continued existence since 1832.

The Bradford Mechanics' Institute Library

The Bradford Mechanics' Institute is one of the oldest institutions in Bradford.

It all began in Glasgow in 1799 where a Yorkshireman, George Birkbeck, lectured on scientific subjects at an Institute which was known as Anderson's University after its founder, John Anderson. Birkbeck needed to have apparatus made and he wrote

"I had frequent opportunities of observing the intelligent curiosity of the unwashed artificers to whose mechanical skill I was often obliged to recourse."

We can sense a class distinction and patronising manner of the educated here but he started free courses for them which grew, and by 1823 the mechanics had formed their own Glasgow University Mechanics' Institute. Birkbeck went to London, where Birkbeck College is

named after him, and set up the London Mechanics' Institute and the word quickly spread, particularly in the North of England.

It might be surprising to learn that in 1825 there was opposition in England amongst the educated classes to this. Some people thought that Mechanics' Institutes would bring together a dissatisfied, rebellious population. After all it was only 35 years after the French Revolution and Luddites were rioting against the installation of machinery in the rapidly expanding textile industry.

But supporters of the movement, including Robert Peel, said education would make people "more willing to take the place in society to which they were ordained"

In the minds of many people education was a means of maintaining the social order rather than a basic human right and there was a feeling that an undue study of science could lead to a scepticism of the existence of God.

Despite these contrasting views Mechanics' Institutes prospered, although most working men were not closely interested in receiving instruction related to their trade. Miners didn't read geology and many weavers thought they knew more about power looms than anyone could teach them. Thus many Mechanics' Institutes which were originally set up to provide scientific education found themselves creating useful general libraries and they began to help another stratum of the population - those who couldn't read, write or do simple arithmetic. The movement spread to Bradford.

In the first half of the 19th century Bradford was a mushrooming wool textile centre - it was the fastest growing town in the country. The industry was becoming mechanised, powered by locally mined coal, and mills were springing up to accommodate the machines. People flooded in for work in the mills as the call for the cottage industry of the surrounding villages disappeared. But living conditions for the workers were appalling. There was no running

water, no drainage, no paved streets, only tiny unsanitary houses. In 1842 a writer described Bradford as the "filthiest and most neglected town in the kingdom" with a population density in parts of the inner city of over 500 persons per acre.

The mass of people grew up without being able to read or write. Young children were employed in the mills. There was private education for the well-off but only some Sunday Schools and some mill schools for children who worked there. Even by the mid 19th century there was no elementary education for the majority of youngsters.

The first recorded attempt to set up a Mechanics' Institute in Bradford was in 1825. The moving spirit was Squire Farrer (Squire was his name not a title). Unfortunately there was a strike at the time and he was a close friend of the strike leader. The Leeds Intelligencer, a newspaper, described him as a 'noted radical and infidel' and his fellow promoter, Charles Wilkinson, as an avowed free thinker. It never got off the ground.

In 1832 there was another attempt when, according to the Leeds Mercury, a 'numerous and respectable' meeting resolved to form an institution for the promotion of useful knowledge amongst the middle and working classes. The Rev Dr Steadman, a Baptist Minister, was elected president and the 11 Directors included 4 Non-conformist Ministers, 2 R.C. Priests, and such luminaries as Titus Salt and Robert Milligan. But the Church of England clergy and Methodists opposed it.

However, these Directors gave it a respectable label.

Its objects were to provide a library, public lectures and a 'liberal education' for young men and others. The 'liberal education' soon came to mean the 3Rs for which there was demand, and classes were started.

Lectures were held and the library grew in rented accommodation. Only serious books were held at first. No novels or party politics were to be bought and in 1835 a proposal that the

library stock the works of Sir Walter Scott was rejected. But the committee must have had its lighter moments for in December 1836 it was resolved "that the person who was taking the liberty of disfiguring several of the plates in 'Baines's History of the Wars' by affixing pipes and cigars to the mouths of several of the likenesses be fined 2/6d."

More accommodation was soon needed and the Directors quickly raised £3,300 to buy a plot of land at the corner of Leeds Road and Wells Street near the centre of the town. At the opening in 1840 the then President, another Baptist minister, hoped "that the people of Bradford, even in the humblest walks of life, would find time alter 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 intemperence, dissipation, obscenity and vice".

He went on in this vein for two hours but the weather was bad and the audience was small! The new building had a reading room, a lecture room, a library and some classrooms. It actually opened with an exhibition of paintings, stuffed animals and birds, and models of machines. In 15 weeks it was visited by 142,000 people. Admission charges made up 20% of the cost of the building.

The Institute prospered. There were classes in Mathematics, Science, Geography, German and Design and lectures of general interest were regularly held but audience behaviour was not all it ought to be. In 1850 the Bradford Observer reported that

"certain sections of the audience at the Mechanics' Institute during recent lectures have chosen to vociferate, and whistle, and raise clouds of dust by useless stamping and in a variety of other ways annoy quiet and well-behaved people"

And we think this sort of behaviour is a modern phenomenon.

The appetite for reading grew with the admission of fiction. 40,000 books were issued in

1864 but it had to be “good, healthy reading”. Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights was considered morally unsound and it was 8 years before it was bought.

But the Institute was rapidly outgrowing the Leeds Road building. The Institute obviously now had some standing in the local community as the Bradford Observer declared “The Mechanics’ Institute was the body best adapted and most likely to afford technical education so desirable in an industrial town like ours.”

Money was raised and a plot of prime central Bradford land opposite the Town Hall was bought from the Council and that fine, imposing building which older Bradfordians remember was built and opened in 1870 at a total cost of £36,000. It had 2 large lecture rooms, classrooms for 700 students, a library and a reading room. Membership was over 2000 and 33 different subjects were taught.

This was the high water mark of The Institute’s education classes. Students were helped by “Whisky Money” scholarships which came from a tax on liquor and an eminent Bradfordian, Henry Brown, donated £1000 to be invested for scholarships. We still have this money today. It has grown and the interest is used to help Bradford students. Some of it is currently used to sponsor a Rotary Technological Tournament.

But competition grew, voluntary schools were being set up and children who worked in some mills got a basic education in the 3 Rs - if they could stay awake. The Education Act of 1870 required all Councils to set up schools to provide elementary education in all areas. This, of course, gradually reduced the demand on the Mechanics’ Institute for basic education classes which gradually petered out,

In 1877 a joint committee of the Mechanics’ Institute and the Bradford Chamber of Commerce set up the Bradford Technical School which offered day and evening classes in textiles. It got its own premises and the Bradford Technical College grew out of it, running

parallel with the Mechanics' Institute to start with, but when the 1902 Education Act put the responsibility for technical education squarely upon local Councils it was decided to pass over all courses to the Technical College. So by the turn of the century the Institute's education classes had disappeared.

But during the second half of the 1800's the library had continued to grow. It had 21000 books and over 1700 members in 1899 despite competition from the Bradford Library and Literary Society which had been founded in 1854 and from Bradford's first public library in 1872 and later branch libraries in outlying districts.

Book borrowing practices were carefully regulated, Members could only take out one book at a time and this went on until 1927 when a circular letter was sent to all members offering the privilege of taking out two books at a time for one year if they secured an extra member for the library.

Public lectures were also held and were very popular and the library was also a base for university extension lectures. This was the basis of the library's activities throughout the 1900's. By now the library was maintaining itself, not through members' subscriptions but by means of the rents it obtained by letting out its ground floor rooms for shop premises and by the rents various organisations paid for the use of its lecture theatres and classrooms. In this respect it was serving the City of Bradford, although the Second World War was a difficult time when lectures stopped and the demand for meeting rooms decreased. As the years went by library membership declined dramatically. By 1968 there were only 268 names on the books Maintenance of the large ageing building was becoming more difficult despite the income from the shops and some room lettings. The time when the library had a thriving social and intellectual life seemed long past.

Then in 1970 the bomb dropped: Bradford Council's 'City Centre Development Plan'.

The Mechanics' Institute was to be demolished. The Provincial Building Society wanted a new headquarters, or it threatened to go to Leeds. The Council needed offices and wanted a civic precinct. The City Council took out an order to demolish the building. It was a Grade 2 listed building so an application had to be made to the Secretary of State for its demolition. Permission was granted in 1970 and the ground floor tenants had to go. The Trustees of the Institute made it clear that they did not want to close down the Institute but were looking to move within Bradford. After much negotiation the Council compulsorily purchased the whole of the 4 storey building for £225,000 in 1972 and the Trustees bought the present premises at the top end of Kirkgate for a lesser sum. A lot of work had to be done to make the premises habitable. One builder went bankrupt during the work. Because of delay the books had to be stored at the Wool Exchange for a couple of months. Goodness knows how many went missing!

The present building was finally opened in 1974. It consists of an area of library bookshelves, a reading room and office space occupying the first floor of the four storey building which had been bought. Most of the much reduced membership kept loyal and moved with the library, and the other three floors were let to tenants.

In 1979 the Institute gained registration as a charity – 'for the advancement of education of the citizens of Bradford and the provision of a library for further study' - and it took the title of 'The Bradford Mechanics' Institute Library'.

The amount by which expenditure exceeded income in the 1980's was a constant worry to the Library committee. Boiler and lift problems persisted. The solicitor tenants of the second and third floors left in 1983 and were not replaced until 1985 when the Wool Record, a publishing company, took up the tenancy. By 1990 membership had fallen to 170. The new Bradford Public Library, which at the time of building was supposed to be the largest in Western Europe, with some 300,000 books, was probably partly responsible for this.

However, in the 1990's fortunes began to revive. Rent reviews generated more income which arrested capital decline. The library interior was refurbished; coffee tables and relaxing chairs were brought into the reading room and a study area created. Membership began to rise.

The Institute is now essentially a lending library. It currently charges £27.50 per person per year, or £33 for family membership of two persons, which can be paid in six-monthly instalments. It has some 14000 books, more fiction than non-fiction, and buys about 30 books per month - all the latest fiction titles and carefully selected works of non-fiction.

But in the 1990's the Library began to take on some new interests. It started to develop itself as a study centre. A series of lectures on varied topics was begun and this led to members coming together in groups to explore common interests, with both an intellectual and a social side.

The 'World War I Group' now has monthly lectures from experts and their own members. It has published 2 books - one a former journal written in the trenches by a Bradford soldier and another more ambitious work: "Bradford in the First World War" which has been on sale in national bookshops. The group also makes an annual pilgrimage to Flanders and in 2002 took a plaque to the village of Hebuterne on the Somme in memory of the Bradford Pals who perished there. The Lord Mayor of Bradford accompanied the group.

There is a Local History Group, a group who study the Brontes, a Gardening Group, a poetry group and a Bridge class.

The Library now holds two social events each year where members can meet, talk, look at displays and enjoy refreshments and a morning's fellowship with other readers. It always attracts a hill house. Three times a year a newsletter, 'The Mechanics', is published which keeps members up to date with Library events. It publishes book reviews, poems and articles

of interest, and is a vehicle for advertising the study groups.

As most Mechanics' Institutes in the UK have not survived the 190 years since the movement started, or have become mainly social centres, the Bradford Institute is probably unique in the way it has developed and is confidently looking forward to meeting further challenges in the twenty-first century.