

**BOOKS, BATHS, AND BILLIARDS:
THE STORY OF THE GREENOCK MECHANICS LIBRARY
& INSTITUTE, 1830-1974**

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At the first Mechanics Worldwide conference, held in 2004, the present author examined the libraries of British mechanics' institutes in general.¹ A few pages were devoted to a potted history of one particular library in Scotland, the Greenock Mechanics Library. The present paper re-visits that same library in order to reveal rather more about its history as a case study of how one organization endeavoured to reach the working classes by providing a library and a lecture programme. But the sub-title reveals more - baths and billiards. How did they become involved with mechanics' institutes?

By the late eighteenth century, small subscription libraries for workers were found in parts of Scotland, particularly around Glasgow, and in Ulster, mostly in Counties Antrim and Down; these were centres both for weaving and Presbyterianism. Weavers were traditionally radical, weaving being one of the few crafts which could be carried out while reading at the same time - if you were very careful: looms are very dangerous! In England, only two genuine, permanent workers' libraries existed before 1800, in Birmingham and Kendal.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, 'trades' or tradesmen's libraries began to appear in Scotland, intended to cater for workers who were effectively excluded from the middle-class subscription libraries which were flourishing in that country.² Such libraries were found in Saltcoats, Langholm, Dysart, Hawick, and Greenock. The Paisley Trades Library (1806) competed against the middle-class Paisley Library Society, but only cost 6s. per year and had no shares; it lasted about 40 years and possessed about 1,000 volumes by 1823. The Dunfermline Tradesmen's Library was established in 1808 by four young journeymen weavers and was to last for 75 years. Kinross Tradesmen's Library (1824) cost a shilling per share and 6d. per quarter. Books hostile to Christianity or the constitution were banned. Only 423 titles had been acquired by 1841, but 2,400 volumes by 1910; it still existed in the 1930s.

Some manufacturers provided libraries for their workers, for instance at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, and in Renton, Dunbartonshire, where William Stirling established a library for the workers at his calico-printing works. Robert Owen, too, included a library in his plan for a school and factory at New Lanark.³ An example of a factory library for workers run on similar lines to a subscription library was the Glasgow Gas Workmen's Library, which began in 1821 and cost 7s.6d. entry plus 1½d. per week; the entry money was refundable if a member quit or died. The rationale for encouraging working men to read improving books was laid out effusively in its regulations:

It is universally admitted, that Ignorance is the greatest source of all the crimes and all the misery with which human nature is disgraced. Man cannot always be engaged in labour: relaxation is necessary to renew his strength, and to prepare him again for labour. In these hours the ignorant man, whose mind is vacant and unoccupied, cannot remain alone; solitude is to him unbearable; he seeks society, and of course the society of such as himself; they have nothing to engage their attention, nothing to supply them with conversation: the tavern, therefore,

¹ K. A. Manley, 'From workers' libraries to public libraries', in: Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Inc., *Building Books and Beyond ...: Proceedings of an International Conference ... 2004* (Melbourne, 2004), pp. 253-66.

² K. A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers, and Shareholders in Scotland: Subscription Libraries before 1825* (Edinburgh, 2009), forthcoming, for chapter on workers' libraries. See also: Brian Burch, 'Libraries and literacy in popular education', in: Giles Mandelbrote & K. A. Manley (eds.), *The Cambridge history of libraries in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2006), vol. 2, pp. 371-87.

³ *The Times*, 29 May & 9 August 1817.

and the gaming table, are their only resources; and to these, and to every species of dissipation and debauchery, they fly for relief.

The works' manager, James Beaumont Neilson (1792-1865), provided a room for the workers to read and converse instead of going to the tavern, with occasional lectures which members' sons could attend. About half of the workforce of 60-70 became members, the remainder claiming that they could not read. This particular library was praised by Timothy Claxton in his *Hints to Mechanics* (1839), which provided useful publicity about the virtues of libraries to mechanics interested in self-help.

Similar libraries included the Glasgow North Quarter Library, founded in or about 1819, which claimed to be the only library in Glasgow to allow access to books for mechanics; it enjoyed free use of a schoolroom.⁴ An enormous success story was the Edinburgh Mechanics' Subscription Library, established as a library rather than a mechanics' institute in March 1825 by three dissatisfied members of the Edinburgh School of Arts, which contained a library for mechanics. They were supported by donations from several booksellers, who obviously saw future profit for themselves since they urged, successfully, that the library, intended for the working men of the city, should include all literature, not solely science. Originally only open for an hour or two a week, it acquired 352 members within five years and soon opened throughout the day and evening. Costing a mere 5s. for a share and 6s. per annum, it had 18,000 volumes by 1850.⁵ In contrast the Perth Mechanics' Library (1824) had only acquired 130 volumes by 1830, but a creditable 11,000 volumes had been amassed by 1897; the books passed to the public library in 1900, though not the many worn-out novels which by then had become the staple fare of the library.⁶

The beginnings of the mechanics' institute movement need only be summarized here. The story of George Birkbeck (who was, in fact, a Yorkshireman) and his lectures at the Andersonian Institution in Glasgow is well-known. His activities led eventually to the formation of the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute in 1823, followed in Scotland by similar organizations in Aberdeen and Dundee in 1824, and in Ayr, Dunbar, Dunfermline, and Dumfries in 1825. And, of course, they began in England and Ireland in the same period. The success of the London Mechanics' Institution was the real spur to the movement.⁷

Their popularity partly coincided with the repeal in 1824 of the Combination Acts, which had prevented people from coming together in reading rooms and elsewhere for political discussion. Caution was still evident. The most influential promoter of such institutes was Lord Brougham, whose popular pamphlet, *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People*, inspired the rapid spread of mechanics' institutes after 1825.⁸ Nevertheless, he was the recipient of considerable antagonism; education for the workers was unwelcome to many.

In Scotland, a flavour of the novelty, if not strangeness, of mechanics' institutes can be detected at the annual meeting of the Dunbar Mechanics' Institution in 1826. One speaker, after pointing out that the institute had somehow contrived to get itself into debt over the formation of its library, commented that popular education was a cause to which everyone, of whatever party or class, should be pleased to support. He noted how strange it would have seemed twenty years ago to imagine a captain of yeomanry addressing a meeting in full regimentals and recommending education for the workers, which is what had occurred at that very meeting. That would have been thought as absurd as the idea of a ship, impelled by steam, rushing past

⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 17 July 1820.

⁵ J. W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London, 1851), pp. 200-1.

⁶ William R. Aitken, *History of the Public Library Movement in Scotland to 1955* (Glasgow, 1971), pp. 309-10.

⁷ The best general summary remains Hudson's *History*, previously cited; see Aitken, *History*, pp. 39-43, for a summary of Scottish developments.

⁸ Henry Brougham, *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People* (London, 1825), pp. 6-7.

Dunbar at a heady ten knots per hour. The times were certainly changing.⁹

Not all mechanics' institutes were immediately successful. The Dumfries Institute died in 1828,¹⁰ possibly because one of its principal promoters was a supporter of Catholic emancipation, and therefore locally unpopular. It was revived in 1831, but a statistical analysis of the population made in the following year for Robert Burns (the poet's son) showed that although over 1,500 mechanics were resident in Dumfries only 29 belonged to the Institute, along with a further 56 members, who were middle class. The Dumfries Mechanics' Institute was not to prosper until it acquired new premises in the 1850s and the books of a private subscription library. In the early 1860s, baths were added - but were a complete failure - and the membership consisted predominantly of clerks rather than mechanics. In 1871 all classes were given up; they could not attract enough attenders. By 1876, only 60 out of 928 members were mechanics. The library and reading room were discontinued in the 1890s, and by 1908 there were only 32 members, and in no way could it be described as contributing to working class education. It continued until almost 1930, but only as a shadow.

A better example of the travails that could upset a mechanics' institute is that of Greenock, a centre of shipbuilding on the River Clyde near Glasgow.¹¹ A private subscription library for the gentry and middle classes had been started here in 1783, while a Trades' Library, intended obviously for tradesmen, was in existence here by about 1809, but was not flourishing by the 1820s. An Arts and Science Lectures Association was formed in the early 1820s and met in the Methodist Chapel, but ceased in 1829. Both organizations were undertaking part of the mission that came to be associated with mechanics' institutes, but neither was on such a scale to satisfy many people. The Lectures Association possessed a small library of 201 volumes which one of the local employers, John Fairrie, a sugar merchant, took over after paying their debts.

Fairrie was approached by a deputation of working men to allow the books to be lent out. Most workers came from shipyards in Greenock, but many came from Cartsdyke, east of the town. Essentially, Cartsdyke was a suburb of Greenock; but you would not say that to a man of Cartsdyke. The natives considered themselves independent of their bigger neighbour. Fairrie insisted that the library's preservation be agreed between workers from both sides of town. At a public meeting, Fairrie was non-plussed when Cartsdyke workers claimed proprietary rights to the books. A compromise was reached; Fairrie would make the books available for a year, and on 26 July 1830 the Greenock Mechanics' Library was founded. The designation is important, because this was not a mechanics' institute; access to books and therefore knowledge was considered more important in the first instance than lectures or scientific experiments. However, the name Greenock upset people in Cartsdyke. And the compromise agreement meant that the library was physically located in a school in an obscure lane in Cartsdyke; Greenock resented that. Both sides bided their time.¹²

In his account of the library, published in 1904, Robert Murray Smith heads this period of its history, 'Early non-success'. There was constant friction between Greenock and Cartsdyke. Fund-raising events were held, but £20 raised from a concert by the Greenock Military Band was not going to go far. At this time the library charged 2s. a year. This was potentially a great institute, but needed a building and a proper footing. In March 1831 an attempt was made to introduce the *Waverley* novels of Sir Walter Scott, a catalyst in many another mechanics' institute. Many people felt a mechanics' institute was no place for novels, but others believed that reading *good* novels had a beneficial influence. But the proposal was defeated by 80 votes

⁹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 September 1826.

¹⁰ W. B. de Bear Nicol, 'The Dumfries and Maxwelltown Mechanics' Institute, 1825-1900', *Dumfriesshire & Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society Transactions* 3rd ser. 28 for 1949-50 (1951), pp. 64-74.

¹¹ Robert M. Smith, *A Page of Local History* (Greenock, 1904) p. 10, and following. Smith's account was based on the Institution's minute books.

¹² *Greenock Advertiser*, 24 April 1834.

to 49, on the ground that the novels were improper, though the contest was as much a battle between Greenock and Cartside than a dispute about literary merit. Meetings were held to consider a building. But where to site it? Greenock or Cartside? There was only one way to find out. FIGHT!! Dirty tactics surfaced. New members had been recruited, and all seemed to live in Cartside; most were foundry workers. They prevented the Greenock members from moving the library into the town. Many from the Greenock faction resigned and deserted to the more convenient, but moribund, Trades Library.

The storm came in September 1832, when the Cartside faction proposed that no more members be recruited to pack meetings until the number of volumes in the library equalled the membership. Greenock agreed. Then Cartside calmly announced that they had gained 187 new members during the previous evening. Greenock cried 'foul', and a member produced a list of 503 men who had been signed up from their side of the boundary. Attempts were made to overthrow the chairman of the meeting and prevent others from entering. The newspapers claimed - if it can be believed - that violent hands were laid on the librarian.¹³ The meeting was suspended in uproar. This was, of course, the period of the Reform Act, when rowdy, public meetings were hardly unknown; political, as well as territorial and class, differences all played their part.

At a further meeting, attended by 1,100 people, a further attempt was made to move the library, but one of the Cartside members produced a writ, signed by the sheriff, which prevented that. The library was split up on that very night. Cartside kept the original 201 books of the Lectures Association for a library of their own, while the remaining volumes were taken to the Greenock Trades Library which dissolved on that same night. The Greenock Mechanics' Library was reformed on its ashes, to 'rapturous applause'.¹⁴ The divorce settlement left the new library in Greenock with 177 books from the former Mechanics' Library plus 193 volumes from the Trades Library. This was still a library and not a mechanics' institute; that was an aspiration, but the total funds only came to £31.8s.2d.

Donations were solicited, but an inspection of the shelves disclosed two infidel books, which had to be expunged so as not to put off donors. They needed support from the middle classes, as well as the workers, but little was forthcoming. As their historian commented, they 'exploited their own pleasure-seeking as a means of aid', such as organizing concerts and balls, but the income raised was small. The new Cartside library also required funds, but a proposal that members should canvas the town together, partly to mollify the townspeople who had resigned from the previous combined library because of the in-fighting, was frowned upon by the Greenock committee. To show their high moral intentions, the Greenock Mechanics' Library voted not to admit books of an infidel or anti-Christian nature, but two days later they voted in the *Waverley* novels.¹⁵ Amongst the earliest books bought were Gibbons' *Decline and fall of the Roman empire*, Hume's *History of England*, the poems of Byron, and other works of history and travels.

The committee became lackadaisical. One small source of income came from fines for late attendance at meetings: 1d. if 15-30 minutes late, 2d. thereafter. Soon, everyone was arriving late, so the fines were dropped.¹⁶ The next stage was to build a new library and include a meeting hall. There was considerable public sympathy for mechanics' institutes. Money was raised by petitioning the workers in turn: ships' carpenters, painters, potters, bakers, hammermen, and so on. The minutes contain phrases such as: 'See the moulders', 'Go to the masons', etc.. Co-operative schemes were tried; the medical practitioners were keen to have space in any new building, but also wanted public baths; but the plug was pulled on that project.

¹³ *Greenock Advertiser*, 24 September 1832; cf. 18 September.

¹⁴ *Greenock Advertiser*, 4 October 1832; cf. 24 April 1834.

¹⁵ Smith, *Page*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Smith, *Page*, pp. 19-20.

Nothing happened.

In 1836 the library contained over 1,200 volumes, and 8,000 volumes were issued. Only two had been lost. As for the lectures almost 450 people had enrolled at 1s. per course for classes on chemistry and phrenology, a trendy subject of the time.¹⁷ Then, in 1839 the institution had to quit its rooms, and a decision was taken to build; £500 was eventually secured, and a central site purchased on Tobago and Sir Michael Streets. On 4 July 1839, the foundation stone was laid after a grand opening parade when 18 music bands, including the 2nd Dragoon Guards, led various workers' groups through the town; 121 banners were displayed. All except the engineers had responded to a call for support, and so were absent from the parade, which included the carters, painters, gardeners, sailmakers, the Society of Oddfellows, the Total Abstiners' Society, and the town council. A newspaper report compared this magnificent spectacle to the miserable support recently shown for the People's Charter. The Chartists seem to have made little impact in Greenock.

The building was termed the Greenock Mechanics' Institution, and at last space was available for lectures, the library, and a reading room, which had a separate membership. The hall was let out for any useful purpose to any sect or party, and, indeed, an attempt to ban the Socialists was defeated, despite the argument that 'any exposition of Socialism by its wily and smooth-tongued adherents' was pernicious to society. But trouble lurked below the surface. Though a committee ran the Institution, the library was run independently. There was an absurd incident when a lecturer donated a book to the Library Committee, but the Institution Committee demanded that it be handed over to them, complaining that the Library Committee's behaviour was 'unbusiness-like and uncourteous'.¹⁸ The Library Committee refused to recognize the legality of having an Institution Committee, on the ground that it had only been appointed to supervise the erection of the building.

The Library Committee feared that the other committee failed to represent the working classes. A group of subscribers engineered a coup in which the Institution Committee was purged of liberal-minded members. The new, conservative, committee severed its connection with the library and refused to allow the hall to be used for a meeting of subscribers. Instead, the town hall was the venue for a general meeting, where a schism was prevented only when the Institution Committee was replaced by a majority from the working classes. The library supporters routed the middle-class conservatives and the church party. Freed from religious constraint, they opened the reading room on Sundays, at least until the Sabbatarians regained the upper hand in 1858. However, the new committee of working men refused to allow the meeting hall to be used for raffles or for dances. Certain aspects of popular culture were definitely not entertained.

During 1845 the country was swept by an agitation in favour of public baths. Sobriety and cleanliness were believed to go hand-in-hand; the Greenock Mechanics' Institution was all in favour. A building was to be bought and converted, but sufficient money could not be raised for another ten years. A Penny Club for the entertainment of poorer members was a success, but the ladies who began the Monday Evening Work Club ran up a debt of £230 and, no doubt blushing, failed to appear at business meetings. Although the Institution was popular, its finances were not extravagantly healthy, and many working people - such as shopkeepers - remained cool towards it, as, of course, were the Sabbatarians. When the purchase of a bagatelle table was suggested for £7, that was too expensive; nor were chess and backgammon boards approved, and they only cost 15s..

Only an average of about 38 books a year were being purchased. A report in 1847 served as a wake-up call, and new books were actively sought. The library was only open for three evenings a week and for one hour each evening. Restricted hours were normal for mechanics'

¹⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 3 December 1836, quoting the 4th annual report of the Institution.

¹⁸ Smith, *Page*, p. 33.

institutes; the Glasgow Mechanics' Institution was open for an hour before lectures and half-an-hour afterwards.

Baths were at last opened in 1855. By 1858, the library comprised 3,000 volumes, and in 1861 had 248 members. But lectures were failing, and debts were rising. Cleanliness, though, was increasing, and receipts from the baths, went up. But because the Institution's hall was available to speakers of all hues and opinions, many townspeople were antipathetic. In 1862 a local minister attacked free-thinking speakers and urged Christians not to support the Institution. The committee argued that they made their rooms available for any lawful purpose and suggested, perhaps unwisely, that the minister should not behave like an Irish priest. Another minister argued that the Institution's weakness was in permitting its hall for any lawful use, when the Town Hall was available, and that it should ban anti-religious meetings; he accused the library of containing objectionable works, but his allegation was investigated and found untrue.

Despite its debts, thought was given to purchasing the Methodist Chapel which lay next door. The committee borrowed the money without telling the members. Opposition was instant, but after a fight, the purchase was agreed. The result was a success. More meeting rooms produced unexpectedly higher income. The baths were re-furbished, and a balcony seating an extra 200 people added to the hall. The library continued to be popular. Not all ventures were successful, and a Glasgow man who tried to introduce a music-hall attraction retired disappointed after losing £200. He ruefully remarked that he had hoped to present cheap entertainment without offering intoxicating drinks; but the poorer inhabitants of Greenock were not ready for such a venture.

In 1860 library opening hours were increased to six evenings a week for two hours each, and in the 1870s it opened in the afternoons. There were still complaints, but as one committee member remarked in justifying the money spent, 'the Library is a precious jewel, the Institution but the casket in which it is enshrined'. Meanwhile, Cartsdye Library dissolved in 1866. Robert Smith, our chronicler, states it 'finally expired from sheer inanition, its estate getting in process to the auction room or the street hawkers' barrow'. A local newspaper confirms that the stock was sold to a local bookseller, D. Macarthur.¹⁹ A suggestion that the Cartsdye building be taken over as an annexe was not pursued.

Yet what changed the character of the Greenock Institution - and this applies to so many others - can be dated to the formation of its Club in 1865. Up until this date the Greenock Mechanics Institution had essentially led a hand-to-mouth existence. It had attracted hundreds of working class men over the years but had never succeeded in becoming a really indispensable part of town life. Workers wanted more than scientific lectures.

Club members were to pay 2d. per week, of which a halfpenny went to the library, to which they were given access as well as to a bagatelle table and boards for chess and draughts. Despite the usual opposition to the expense, the proposals were enacted, and 100 new members joined almost immediately. Unfortunately, the second-hand billiards tables proved to be in a deplorable state and had to be replaced. Plans for a gymnasium and a curling table were proposed but abandoned, but the Institution was exempted from paying local rates. Smoking was prohibited, which prevented the club from enjoying a proper club-like, if pungent, atmosphere, though this was eventually relaxed. Then came what our historian, R. M. Smith, described as 'the great Card-playing Reproach'. Members were playing cards, not sanctioned by the rules. Lawful card games were then permitted, then stopped because members were gambling, but, eventually, all restrictions were swept away.

The tipping point had been reached. In 1872 lectures and classes - in English, Latin, music, and chemistry - were given up, and the library was used increasingly for fiction. £80 was spent on a state-of-the-art billiard table, while the unfashionable bagatelle table was consigned to the

¹⁹ *Greenock Advertiser*, 20 March 1865.

dustbin. In 1880 the space in the Club room was doubled - its dimensions were now 62 feet by 35 - and the baths were extended. As Smith, again, wrote, the Club had become 'the beating heart of the Institution' and was virtually unique in the country as a place where young men could meet and smoke 'free of moral taint'. A proposal to sell cigars and cut tobacco was defeated, though.

Library subscribers amounted to 391 in 1884; over 7,000 visited the Club and almost 2,500 the reading room. But the number of baths was 4,335, a fall from 6,191 in the previous year, blamed on a decline in trade and therefore higher unemployment. A new subscription of 12s.6d. p.a. was introduced, which covered all departments.²⁰ Experiments to attract new library users were tried, such as family membership, which was moderately successful, and a boys' section, which was not, and the library did gain further space. The popularity of Victorian fiction authors such as Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot did, though, play a part in changing tastes away from improving literature.

In 1890 a collection of technical books was added as a memorial to Robert Hendry, a former president. But a rapid rise in membership of the library was ascribed not to books on mechanics but rather a nationwide interest in erotic novels, Zola, of course, being the chief culprit in fanning the flames. Over 600 subscribers belonged to the library at one point. Most interestingly, in 1896 the library adopted the open access system, allowing subscribers to the shelves; this was long before many public libraries.

But the writing was on the wall. A municipal, rate-supported library for Greenock had been discussed since the 1850s. The increase of local schools following the Education Act of 1870 meant that one of the Institution's key original functions - provision of lectures and classes - had been superseded by evening classes organized by the School Board. At last, when the public library was established in Greenock in 1900, assisted by a wad of banknotes from Mr Andrew Carnegie, the mechanics' institution abandoned its long-cherished belief that it was offering a public library service for the working community and resigned itself to being a club. On 1 July 1903 the library was closed and handed over to the new public library. And yet Greenock's own private subscription library, the Greenock Library, founded in 1783, continued in existence until 1972. It still had 682 members in 1966 and subsequently re-opened as the town's Local History Library, incorporating the Subscription Library's older stock.

The Mechanics Institution itself continued as a club. The baths were reconstructed in 1919, and in 1920 the hall was converted into one of those new-fangled picture houses. The building was destroyed in the Blitz in 1941, but the Institution re-opened, moving to a nearby church in 1950, and then to an old theatre, also formerly a church. However, hooliganism forced its total closure in 1961, and the building was sold to an entertainment company.²¹ The Institution continued to exist, at least notionally, with plans to re-open, but in 1974 its funds were finally handed over to an official educational trust for Renfrewshire.²²

Greenock has a long and honourable tradition of providing a library service for the middle and lower classes. The history of its library provision is not without incident, as has been seen. But such a long continuous history is worth remembrance. The fact that the mechanics' library was transferred so smoothly to the new public library does show that its directors were alive to the core reason why their organization existed. They wanted to provide books for the working man and did not try to retain those books simply as part of a private club. They recognized the inevitability of the public library. Over the decades, their work in keeping the Greenock Mechanics' Institution viable, if not always very active, should certainly count towards considering the institution a success, at least during Queen Victoria's heyday.

Workers' libraries changed enormously between the 1790s and 1890s, but so did what

²⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 30 January 1885.

²¹ *Greenock Telegraph*, 8 November 1961, 3 January 1963.

²² *Edinburgh Gazette*, 16 July 1974.

workers wanted. The spread of cheap magazines, unknown in the eighteenth century, helped to spread technical knowledge, but also created a greater desire for fiction. But the death knell of mechanics' institutes, at least as intended by George Birkbeck and Lord Brougham, was caused by the coming of municipal libraries and schools. Education for the workers was still needed, obviously, but new directions were opening out.