

**Second Mechanics Institutes Worldwide Conference,
held at Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution,
Bath, UK, Sept 24th-28th 2009.**

**Welcoming speech by Dr Peter Ford (pictured right) at the
Roman Baths, in the presence of Cllr Bryan Chalker ,
Chair of Bath and North-East Somerset Council.**



Councillor Chalker, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of all the delegates and helpers attending this conference I would like to thank you and Bath and North East Somerset Council for your kindness in hosting this Civic Reception. This is the second Mechanics Worldwide Conference and is devoted to Independent Libraries, Athenaeums, Literary & Philosophical Societies, Working Men's Institutions and similar organisations. Their heyday was in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, although many still exist today both in the United Kingdom and the rest of the English speaking world.

The previous meeting was held in 2004 in Melbourne, Australia and at the conclusion of that meeting there was strong support that the next one should be held here in Bath in 2009. The major reasons for choosing Bath are its superb architecture, its beauty and its historical associations. I believe that one of the most iconic and memorable views in Bath is that of the Roman Baths, particularly in the relative peace and quiet of the evening, and I am most appreciative to you that we have all had an opportunity to experience this.

The subtitle of the conference is "Self Help" named after a classic book written 150 years ago by Samuel Smiles. It emphasises the importance of qualities in the individual such as hard work, thrift, determination and perseverance. 1859 was a bumper year for important books. Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, George Eliot *Adam Bede*, John Stuart Mill *On Liberty* and of course Charles Darwin *The Origin of Species*. This year, which also marks the bi-centenary of the birth of Darwin, has seen enormous media attention focusing on his life and work. Not least among these has been the excellent series of lectures and the exhibition put on by the Bath Royal Literary & Scientific Institution.

By contrast, the work of Samuel Smiles on *Self Help* is nowadays largely ignored although it was widely acclaimed at its publication and studied for many years afterwards, being translated into quite a few languages. However, I believe that the philosophy expounded in his book has a huge amount of relevance for today. For example his chapter entitled *Money - its Use and Abuse* is as relevant today as it was one hundred and fifty years ago when it was written, especially in view of events occurring in the last year or so.

In his book Smiles gives brief life histories of a large number of people, many from very humble background, who through dint of their own efforts have achieved

remarkable success in all walks of life. Two of these are local Bath heroes. The first is William Herschel, who developed an interest in astronomy while living in Bath and succeeded in building the finest telescopes of his day. By his painstaking observations he discovered the planet Uranus in 1781 here in Bath as well as pioneering much of modern astronomy. The second is William Smith who was a surveyor for many canals, such as the Somerset Coal Canal, during the early days of the Industrial Revolution. His meticulous observations of the fossil record lying in the ground led him to put forward his revolutionary idea of the stratification of the earth's crust and to produce the first geological maps. He is nowadays frequently referred to as the "The Father of Geology".

Many thousands of people come each year to Bath to enjoy its Architecture, Museums and History and also to walk in the footsteps of Jane Austin. Few people recognise or appreciate the important contribution made by a large number of Bath citizens in the areas of Science, Medicine and Engineering, which continues to this day.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have a very enjoyable conference, and during your stay here are able to sample the many delights Bath has to offer.