

**Mechanics, Artizans, Operatives, Labourers and Others:
Libraries for the working classes in nineteenth-century Nottinghamshire**

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**** Introduction**

The English county of Nottinghamshire lies in the East Midlands, bisected by the River Trent – traditionally the division between the north and south of England. ** This map of 1751 gives an idea of where things are. At that time and into the 19th century much of the centre of the county was still covered by Sherwood Forest (yes, Robin Hood is our patron saint), though this has been reduced over the past century; the north of the county was dominated by the Dukeries, the vast estates and parklands of the Duke of Newcastle, the Duke of Portland, the Duke of Kingston and other noble families.

Much the largest town in the county was and still is Nottingham (it became a city in 1898) in the south-west. Other major urban centres were Mansfield in the west, Newark in the east, and Worksop and Retford in the north. Forestry and agriculture were major industries in the northern part of the county, but the textile industry (especially framework knitting) was important in the towns and villages around Nottingham – which led to the Luddite agitation and the growth of a reputation for radicalism which continued for many years (Nottingham elected the only Chartist MP in the country. In the later 19th and 20th centuries much of the county was dominated by coal-mining, until Margaret Thatcher’s pit-closures in the 1980s. As far as I can establish, the innumerable Miners Welfare institutions that grew up with the collieries never offered library services, unlike their counterparts in Wales – though many of them still survive as social centres with strong football and cricket clubs and, notably at Worksop, a brass band dating back to the 1830s.

So much for the geographical background. Nottinghamshire has a long history of libraries – back to monastic libraries in the Middle Ages, church libraries from the 17th century, notably in ** Southwell Minster and at St Mary Magdalene in ** Newark, and a flourishing book-trade, with many circulating libraries ** in every town and especially in Nottingham in the 18th century. Several subscription libraries too were founded in the early 19th century - in Nottingham itself the Subscription Library, now ** Bromley House Library (a founder-

member of the AIL), opened in 1816 – quite a late foundation of this kind of middle-class library. Today I shall be talking about the libraries that were established specifically for the working class, or at least included them explicitly in the list of those they intended to serve.

The pattern is not an unusual one for the most part, and could be matched in other parts of the UK – but there are some special features that make Nottinghamshire particularly interesting. I've called my talk ** 'Mechanics, Artizans, Operatives, Labourers and Others' because the first three terms, at least, were all used in the names of libraries – though it is not clear quite what distinguished operatives from artizans or from mechanics (I suspect there was some social stratification, but it is very hard to be sure) – and agricultural labourers were also catered for. Coal-miners, the largest working group by the end of the century, don't appear to have had much specific library provision.

By the early 19th century awakening social consciences among the middle classes were seeking to 'improve' the lower orders, and many efforts were made to provide them with reading-matter, as well as the opportunity for self-education through classes and lectures. The best-known examples are the Mechanics' Institutions. ** J.N. Hudson's major account of them, *The history of adult education, in which is comprised a full and complete history of the mechanics' and literary institutions*, published in 1851, listed five actual Mechanics' Institutions in Nottinghamshire, ** [map – point out] at East Retford, Edwinstowe, Mansfield, Newark, and Nottingham. There were also number of other libraries of this kind, though not called Mechanics' and so not listed by Hudson, such as the Nottingham Artizans' Library founded in 1824, and Artizans' Libraries in both Radford and Stapleford by 1837 – these two places are now suburbs of Nottingham. The Eastwood and Greasley Artizans' and Mechanics' Institution (not listed by Hudson) was founded in 1839, and it survived at least until the end of the century (its library was used by D.H. Lawrence, but little is known of its history). In Worksop there was a 'Reading Society and Mechanics' Institute' about 1840, though it was later re-founded and may have been in suspension when Hudson was writing. ** There was also the People's Hall in Nottingham, founded in 1856 as a 'democratised mechanics' institute', with 'lecture-hall, library, reading, school and refreshment rooms' – the librarian had to provide ** the refreshments 'such as tea, coffee, cocoa, bread, butter, cheese, fruit, buns, biscuits, soup, vegetables, and meat, and no intoxicating liquor or tobacco'. It is still in existence in once-handsome premises in Heathcote Street – though as a social and snooker club, no longer as a library.

** So there were many libraries for the working classes in Nottinghamshire by the mid-19th century, and I shall return to some of these later.

The first to be founded appears to be the Nottingham Artizans' Library ** opened in 1824 and lasting for more than 40 years. This, like some other bodies, was a 'top-down' charitable establishment; its first president was the Rev. Robert White Almond, who was also President of the Subscription Library ** and though a sincere philanthropist was definitely a member of the town's élite. The Artizans' had shareholders (that is, well-heeled supporters rather than readers) who had paid £5, and the 100 members paid an entrance fee of 12/6 and a subscription of 1/6 per quarter. It opened in the town centre, in a small room in Bridlesmith Gate, then moved to Smithy Row in 1825, in one of the upper rooms of the Exchange building. By 1850 the committee complained of lack of space for lectures and other events. This made the Artizans' less attractive than the Mechanics', which had opened in 1837, and ** a new building was erected in Thurland Street in 1853. This building, and the 10,000 volumes in the Artizans' Library, were turned over to the Town Council for the new Free Library in April 1868 - ** marked by this plaque.

The Artizans' Library's archives survive in part, notably the minutes of the annual meetings – though they don't report the most dramatic event, the secession of 1835, which I'll come on to in a few minutes. There were links with the Subscription Library (as well as having a President, they supplied one of the first librarians to the Artizans', who copied the classification scheme); there is also a single reference to a 'Female Artizans' Library' hiring a room at the Subscription Library in 1825 - though nothing else is known of this feminist establishment.

In Newark a pamphlet was published in 1826 proposing the establishment of a Mechanics' Institution, ** with an interesting definition: it should be 'accessible to all workmen who derive their support from the exercise of their own skill and labour; though it includes mechanics, it will exclude none who are disposed to partake of its advantages' – including apprentices 'under due regulation'. The pamphlet suggested that 'There are very few persons, even of labouring conditions, who could not easily afford the small payment [*of twopence a week*], which would be necessary for the support of an excellent library'.

** [*1860 map – point out Newark & Mansfield*] However, the Newark proposal seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and the first actual Mechanics' Institute in the county was in Mansfield, though the early records are scanty. It dates from 1834, founded by a Miss Catherine Harker and Mr John Pearson, and even in its first couple of years was significant enough to inspire the founder of Edwinstowe's MI, as we'll see in a minute or two. Hudson's 1851 report said it had 190 members and 1400 volumes – quite a small collection. The

Mansfield Institute acquired its own premises in Queen Street in 1861, and erected a new building there in 1898 for its 'mutual improvement society' with a library of 4000 volumes. By 1927, however, the library had closed (the building was demolished in the 1970s) and the institute now survives only as a snooker and bridge club. (Some of the books, at least, were presented to the Public Library when the building was demolished.)

[Point out on map] Newark did eventually acquire a Mechanics' Institution, founded in 1836 and surviving until 1923. Though now lost, like Mansfield, it is better documented. The public meeting which started it off, in July 1836, had the support of the High Sheriff of the county, and was clearly an 'establishment' event with a philanthropic purpose. It aimed at 'improving the moral and intellectual character of the working classes' and wanted to 'avoid party politics and controversial divinity' – a very common stipulation in the rules of these 'top-down' libraries, and one which had remarkable repercussions in Nottingham, as we shall see. The eleven-year-old Newark Stock Library was clearly not seen as a suitable means to reach the working classes, just as in Nottingham, where the Mechanics' opened twenty-one years after the Subscription Library, to serve a different market.

The Newark Mechanics' opened in September 1836; ** it had various homes around the Market Place, then later moved to this building on Middlegate, where it remained until it closed in 1923. It had 192 members by 1838, and over 300 by 1840, when the library had grown to 1778 volumes. ** A catalogue published in 1854 shows the traditional lack of enthusiasm for fiction among the directors of Mechanics' Institutes, with only 300 titles in the Fiction section, all respectable authors like Walter Scott, Marryat, Dickens and Bulwer Lytton (though there were two copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Hudson in 1851 remarked on Newark's relatively high rate of loans (7000 a year = more than 30 per member) compared with Mansfield and Nottingham – and around this time there was also a newsroom, quite an uncommon feature of mechanics' institutions. Sadly, by 1872 the President was regretting the lack of support from the working classes – most of the committee were aldermen, councillors or professional men – and the competition from the newly opened Gilstrap Free Library soon caused more problems. By 1902 the library had a 'large accumulation of old books', the worthless part of which was disposed of – but by 1923 the Newark MI finally closed its doors.

The Nottingham Mechanics' was a large-scale operation, well-documented and with copious printed catalogues. ** It began in October 1837, in premises in St James's Street, just across the Market Square from the Artizans' in the Exchange. ** In 1845 it opened a new purpose-built hall and library in Milton Street, a prominent part of the townscape and attracting well-known speakers for lectures and a wide range of classes (until it burnt down in 1867 and was

replaced by an even more impressive classical building which survived until the Second World War). It had a large membership – over 800 members according to Hudson in 1851 – though as time went on it became less ‘mechanical’ and catered more for white-collar workers. The library was only one part, though an important one, of this institution which contributed greatly to Nottingham’s development. It was however not a wholly liberal establishment: ** in 1849 it was noted that ‘To prevent improper discussions or disputes, and to make the institution more extensively useful, books on politics and religion that are controversial are excluded from the library’. In the later 19th century it was one of the largest in the country, with a lending stock of almost 25,000 volumes and a membership of 5000, and from it sprang proposals for what became University College Nottingham in 1881. By the mid-twentieth century its own educational facilities had become less formal, though classes and talks continued in the ‘New Mechanics’ in Burton Street and now in another new building ** in North Sherwood Street. There is still a small library, though it is very largely for leisure reading and is, I’m afraid, not even a shadow of the substantial library that existed for the first century of the Mechanics’ history.

Both the Nottingham Mechanics’ and the Artizans’ were, as I’ve said, essentially ‘top-down’ institutions, run by the town’s élite with the excellent aim of improving the condition of the lower classes (and of course of exercising social control, which was why the book-stock was carefully monitored). So too was the Radford Artizans’ Library, in an industrial suburb a couple of miles from the centre of Nottingham. This was founded by 1837 ‘for the benefit of the inhabitants of Radford and its vicinity’, and with strong clerical influence, to judge from the rules, ** which twice state that ‘No works opposed to pure morals, or to the great doctrine of justification by faith alone, or of the divinity or atonement of Christ, shall be admitted’ – though a few dozen novels were stocked.

This kind of selection policy was not, however, universally appreciated. In 1835 (before the Nottingham Mechanics’ or the Radford Artizans’ were even founded) matters at the Nottingham Artizans’ came to a head. The result was the establishment of the Operatives’ Libraries which were a unique feature of Nottingham in the mid-19th century. Half a dozen of the Artizans’ members, led by William Brooksbank, wanted to read ** *Popular History of Priestcraft* by the radical Nottingham writer William Howitt. The Artizans’ committee refused to acquire such an inflammatory text. In August 1835 Brooksbank and his friends seceded from the library and subscribed a small sum each to buy the book between them; this led to further purchases and a growing circle of borrowers, based in the Rancliffe Arms in Leenside (a pub noted for its radical and Chartist affiliations). So was formed the first

Operatives' Library. This was wholly democratic, with very low subscriptions and all decisions in the hands of the members.

Before long more Operatives' Libraries had sprung up, in pubs in various working-class areas around the town centre. ** Seven of them formed a kind of co-operative, with the libraries numbered 1 – 7, and by 1840, only five years after the secession from the Artizans', four more existed. ** There was a cluster round Charlotte Street (near the Milton Street home of the Mechanics'), and others in the working-class suburbs of Sneinton, Radford and Hyson Green. (Few of the pubs they occupied still exist – only I think ** the Loggerheads in Narrow Marsh, which housed the splendidly-named as the 'Philomathian Divan', and ** the Sir John Borlase Warren at Canning Circus – but neither seems to have retained any trace of the libraries.) There was also a 'Temperance Operatives' Library' at Smith's Coffee House in Houndsgate in the town centre in 1841. ** Some of these Operatives' Libraries were quite large - catalogues from the 1840s and 50s survive for No. 1 and No. 2, and Library No. 1 lasted at least until the 1890s, when it had 8000 volumes - though others only had a handful of books.

** What is more, the first rules of Library No. 1 state:

As we believe, no political institution ought to stand that cannot bear examination, and no creed ought to be believed that cannot bear discussion, we, therefore, resolve to purchase works of every description, political and theological, as well as those embracing history, science, and literature.

So, not only Howitt's *Priestcraft* but political writing such as Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* feature in these catalogues, along with leisure reading and practical manuals. In addition, some of them actively encouraged the participation of women and children, and Library No. 3 had a separate and well-stocked 'juvenile' section by the 1850s. They clearly served a need that the élite establishments did not.

This did not go unnoticed. Reports of the Operatives' annual meetings and dinners appear in the local newspapers, with splendid self-congratulatory speeches reported. **

They rejoice that the rising generation are daily becoming more desirous of information, and they hope that your exertions will not be relaxed; that those whose daily bread is earned by labour may find, in becoming members of societies like this, that their cabinets are stored with instruction and delight.

And their radical origins were not ignored: **

To the higher and middle classes we would say, - Gentlemen, remember we are the root of the social tree, and if that root is impregnated with poison and death, what is to become of the branches, the leaves, the flowers, and the fruit? In conclusion, when the condition of the labourer is depressed, neglected, and demoralized, the other classes of society can rest upon no solid foundation.

The parallel meetings of the Mechanics' Institution took a more puzzled view of this competition, which as the Operatives' expanded was taking away members of the working classes: **

It had been said that 'one man could bring a horse to water while five could not make him drink'. In their own instance they [the Mechanics'] had found the water, but for some reason or other the operatives would not drink the water they had found them; while, on the other hand, they had found 700 of them drinking other water, their own way. He only wished some arrangements could be made which would induce the mechanics of the town to join the Institution.

But in the end it was the Mechanics' that survived, while the Operatives' disappeared almost without trace.

In fact there is one more parallel in the county to the Operatives' way of 'doing it their own way'. ** This was at Edwinstowe (the village in the heart of Sherwood Forest where Robin Hood is said to have married Maid Marian), where the artisan-painter Christopher Thomson ** tried in 1836 to set up a library, but only two people were interested. So, as he says in his *Autobiography of an Artisan*, 'I joined myself to the Mansfield Mechanics' Institution, and found it of great use to me'. ** (He dedicated the book "To the Artisans and Labourers of England, fellow-workmen in the holy cause of self-elevation".) He used Mansfield as a model when in 1838 he succeeded in setting up an Artisans' Library in the village, which flourished for several years, with classes and social activity as well as book-provision from a modest stock of over 500 volumes, without involving the gentry as donors or honorary members. ** It was later known as the Penny Library and seems to have been housed in the Jug & Glass – this is the present pub, probably a later building (but just opposite the "Old Library" built in 1913 ** which became part of the county library system).

In a very interesting account contained in Spencer T. Hall's *The Forester's Offering* of 1841, ** Thomson says that the rules were copied from Mansfield's, with the difference that apprentices could borrow, and women were admitted as members. He speaks of 'men of all the trades in the neighbourhood, as well as farmers and agricultural labourers, many of whom reside at distances varying from two to six miles from the village'. ** Spencer Hall also referred to 'the toiling cotton-spinners of Cuckney-Mills ... hastening to the library for some valuable books with which to render their sabbath-rest still sweeter' (though a reading-room was established at Cuckney itself in the 1840s). He goes on: **

To say nothing of the efficient libraries in Mansfield and Worksop, where the stimulants to mental advancement are naturally more numerous and active, what are we to think of woodmen, agricultural labourers, etc., after the wonted toils of the day are concluded, plodding six miles through the depths of the Forest to the rural village of Edwinstowe ... to carry back instruction, peace, and a glorious example into the bosoms of their families? **

This picture, like that of the textile operatives in Nottingham exercising their intellectual muscle, makes one consider the levels of literacy which prevailed in the 'lower orders' of the county, both urban and rural, in the first decades of the 19th century, and what basic educational facilities existed for them. The evidence from these libraries is that reading was quite widespread and book-learning was much appreciated, at a lower level of society as well as in the formally educated classes.

Less formally aimed at the working classes, but certainly frequented by working men (and women, perhaps), were the 'village libraries' set up in the 19th century. Examples of these were found in Beeston (1838), Cotgrave (1850), a 'Town Library' in Basford by 1853 and 'Rural' libraries in Wollaton in 1857 and Lenton in 1858 (of these Basford, Beeston, Lenton and Wollaton are now suburbs of Nottingham). The library at Carlton-in-Lindrick, in the north of the county and one of the oldest, has an interesting account of its purpose in the Rules printed in its 1838 catalogue: **

This collection of books is not selected so much with a view to afford useful and interesting reading to the Cottager, as to persons in the middle rank of life, - the use of it, therefore, is not confined to Carlton, but is extended to Worksop and all the neighbouring villages and hamlets.

The logic is not very clear (was Carlton short of ‘persons in the middle rank’?), but it is unusual to find such an explicit statement of class distinction. The Carlton library contained a good deal of theology, and so did other village libraries.

** The Litchfield Library at Epperstone, a village some miles east of Nottingham, was established in 1839 and is remarkable for having its own building (still extant, though no longer used as a library) ** with an explicit inscription on the lintel. I suspect it was of the same ‘top-down’ character as most of the earlier libraries: it had a board of trustees and was clearly aimed originally at the middle classes, but it courteously admitted ‘labourers, mechanics and young persons’ more cheaply when the subscription was raised – it admitted apprentices too. ** It published a catalogue of its wide-ranging stock in 1844, with over 2000 volumes including sections on ‘Agriculture, farriery, gardening & botany’ and on ‘Mathematics, the mechanic arts, and natural philosophy’, both containing many books of a practical nature and both out-numbering the section on ‘Sacred literature’ – suggesting that it was trying to meet the needs of the local workers.

In the early 1850s the vicar of Upton, the Rev. F.W. Naylor, founded a village library (the village is between Southwell and Newark in the east of the county). Naylor wrote two books on rural libraries, now little-known but of considerable interest. ** The first of these, *Popular libraries in rural districts, their adaptability to meet one of the social necessities of the times, with remarks on the advantages of general reading to all classes, and Suggestions for the establishment of popular libraries in rural districts, on a self-supporting and inexpensive plan*. This was published about 1855, in London, Nottingham and Southwell. The practical suggestions draw largely on his own Upton Library, which by then had a stock of 450 volumes and 120 subscribing members, at two shillings a year, and had, remarkably, set up 5 outlying branches. Sadly, I have not been able to find any trace of their survival. The principles he worked on were that

(1) Such libraries must be independent, and based on the needs and wishes of the users, rather than being seen a charity, or the imposition of ‘good deeds’ by the upper classes; rather, they should be run by those directly involved (he cited Lord Brougham’s strictures in a recent Lords’ debate on Mechanics’ Institutes and ‘the advantages seen in Cumberland where they are operated by the Mechanics themselves’).

(2) Books should not be simply ‘religious or didactic’ but calculated to create and sustain popular interest;

(3) The importance of social intercourse as part of the formula for success – e.g. by annual parties, not only to raise funds but to bring readers together.

He proposed ‘District Libraries’ since many villages were not large enough to have enough subscribers, what we would call a critical mass. Small communities might have a ‘depot’ with books being changed regularly. His scheme was aimed first at ‘those of the middle ranks’ but he was very happy to offer services to the ‘labouring population of our village’, since it is ‘not want of natural capacity’ but rather ‘the want of the habit of enquiry’ that held them back. His later and more extensive book, *Continuing education; or, practical suggestions about libraries, discussion-meetings, lectures, etc.* (London, 1858), expanded on these ideas and is an important text in the history of adult education.

** Later in the 19th century more of these village libraries, often with reading-rooms attached, sprang up all over the county – at Kirklington in 1865, at North Collingham in 1867, at Bingham in 1869, at North Muskham in 1876, and elsewhere later in the century. (The North Muskham library consisted mostly of ‘improving’ novels and moral tales, and continued until 1937.) These were certainly used by workers in the villages, but were not specifically directed at them. It was not until the 1920s that the county library services reached out to rural communities – some decades later than in the towns – so these libraries did have a useful purpose; but they do not perhaps fit my definition of “libraries for mechanics, artizans, operatives, labourers and others”. The world had changed by the later part of the 19th century, and many of the former needs had been met elsewhere.

[31 minutes.]