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The Institute's Early Days

With the passing of the Berkhamsted and Northchurch Property Protection Association, the Berkhamsted Institute has the undisputed distinction of being the town's oldest society.

As the Berkhamsted Mechanics' Institute—the word "Mechanics" was dropped in 1930—it was started in 1845, only a few years after the railway came to Berkhamsted and before the town had gas and piped water. The Institute belongs to that great age when the revival of the Grammar School and the establishment of the town's first elementary schools encouraged a few far-sighted men to provide adult education.

Starting with a modest reading room and library, the Institute grew in size and importance. Lectures, evening classes and exhibitions were held, and presidency of the Institute was the town's most coveted honour. Though activities have necessarily contracted in the 20th century, 200 members still use the spacious reading and recreation rooms in the Town Hall buildings. And the membership is rising once more.

DR. BIRKBECK

What were Mechanics' Institutes? The movement was born in 1800, when Dr. George Birkbeck, the physician and philanthropist, started a class for journeymen mechanics at Glasgow. But it was not until 1823 that the first so-called Mechanics' Institute was founded in London by Dr. Birkbeck, with the support of Bentham, Wilkie, Cobbett and Brougham. Although activities were at first confined to teaching mechanics the principles of their trade, the basis was quickly enlarged to give all working men a general education by means of lectures, classes, libraries and reading rooms. The movement spread to the provinces, but no Mechanics' Institute ever equalled

in fame the London foundation, known today as Birkbeck College, one of the colleges of London University.

Locally, the movement began when the Rev. E. J. Wilcox, headmaster of Berkhamsted School, granted the use of a schoolroom for two public lectures on "The Philosophy of the Human Mind," by an itinerant lecturer whose name has been forgotten. At the second lecture the audience discussed the need for a Mechanics' Institute, and a provisional committee was formed, consisting of John Tawell, a wealthy business man who lived at the Red House, R. Leete, surgeon, Daniel Norris, miller, Henry Nash, leather-sealer, and R. Littleboy.

AT THE RED HOUSE

The first committee meeting was held at the Red House, and John Tawell invited the members to meet again in his drawing room.

But no second meeting took place at the Red House. John Tawell, a comparative newcomer who had married the proprietress of a small private school in Berkhamsted, figured in a trial which set tongues wagging throughout the land. He was a murderer.

As a druggist's traveller, Tawell first fell foul of the law by forging a cheque. He was transported to Australia, and, after three years as an assistant in a convict hospital, was granted a ticket of leave. In Sydney he started a drug and grocery shop, speculated successfully in oil and shipping shares, amassed a fortune, and eventually returned to England.

The people of Berkhamsted could scarcely believe their eyes when they read that Tawell had been found guilty of poisoning his first wife's nurse, whom he had installed in a cottage at Salt Hill, near Slough. Interest in the crime mounted when it was known that Tawell was the first murderer to be caught by means of the electric telegraph. Five thousand people witnessed his hanging in Aylesbury market place in March, 1845.

FIRST READING ROOM

So much for Tawell. So discouraged were his fellow committee men that nothing more was said about a Mechanics' Institute for six months. Then, in September, 1845, another public meeting was held, in the "Chalk" School, now Park View School.

Because the rector, the Rev. John Crofts, had expressed his decided objection to such institutions (he failed to see how a knowledge of the arts and sciences would contribute to the happiness of working men), only eleven men attended the inaugural meeting. But each man contributed 2s. 6d. to a general fund, and the first reading room was established in the house of Mr. Platrier, a printer. (This house, subsequently

part of Messrs. H. C. Ward and Son's drapery shop, was pulled down and rebuilt by Mr. Jack Sharland a short time ago.)

The reading room was opened on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays from 6 to 9 p.m., Mr. Platrier's weekly charge of 1s. 6d. including "fire and candle." Books were purchased, lectures were held, and Monday evenings were devoted to discussions.

GROWING PAINS

From Mr. Platrier's house a move was made to a private house in Castle Street, now the Gardener's Arms, and from thence to a room in Nash's yard, now replaced by the Civic Centre. It was here where the curate, the Rev. J. W. Cobb, gave the two lectures on "The History of Berkhamsted" which were afterwards published in book form.

Here, in the heart of Berkhamsted, the Institute grew apace. A new Rector, the Rev. James Hutchinson, was a prominent supporter, and by 1852 there were sixty members and a library of 200 volumes. Expenditure included £9 2s. 10d. for newspapers and printing; 13s. 6d. for *Punch*, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," etc.; £5 7s. 6d. for the rent of Mr. Nash's room; £3 3s. for a lecturer; and 9d. for candles at the lecture. There was no local paper nearer than *Aylesbury News*, which was brought to Berkhamsted by a man with a dog-cart which was actually drawn by a dog.

GEORGE CRUICKSHANK

Among the men who helped the Mechanics' Institute at this period was Charles Dickens' artistic friend George Cruickshank, who had relatives at Lagley, Northchurch. He addressed a meeting in the town, and a letter from the famous artist is still preserved in the reading room. The Crimean War, too, helped to swell the Institute's membership; day after day the reading room, open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., was crowded with men who "found it a convenience to have access to several daily papers." Incidentally, in 1850 the committee decided to have long-defunct *Evening Express* sent by rail on the day of publication instead of waiting for it to arrive by post on the following day.

Three different reading rooms had been tried, and now it was time to seek still larger premises. A special sub-committee was formed to ascertain whether one or two empty houses in the town were suitable as new quarters for the Institute. Tired of "lodgings," the members wanted a house of their own. Committee meetings were held either at the lecture room of the Grammar School or at the Bourne Charity School, the red-bricked building now occupied by the National Provincial Bank.

While inquiries for new premises were being made, the old market house at the top of Water Lane was burnt down. The rector at once foresaw a possibility that would permanently solve the Institutes' housing problem. Why not build a new market house that would include a Town Hall and suitable rooms for the Institute?

(To be continued.)

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

March 31—April 6: Dickman.
April 7—13: Figg.
April 14—20: Dickman.
April 21—27: Taylor.
April 28—May 4: Boots.
May 5—11: Figg.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—
Mon., Tues., Thurs., & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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