

The Town's Oldest Society

EARLY DAYS OF THE INSTITUTE

By 'BEORCHAM'

When, in its centenary year (1945), I wrote a *History of the Berkhamsted Institute*, I never imagined that the town's oldest society would ever leave the reading room it had occupied since the Town Hall was built in 1859-60. Not that the Institute is closing down; as 'Townsmen' states elsewhere in this issue, some interesting plans for its future are under discussion.

Founded as the Berkhamsted Mechanics' Institute in 1845 the word 'Mechanics' was dropped in 1930 - it belongs to the period 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.

What were Mechanics' Institutes? The movement began 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-seller, and R. Littleboy.

TAWELL'S CRIME

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, married Mrs. Cutforth, proprietress of a small local private school for girls, and in 1845 he figured in a trial which sent 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.

A FRESH START

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, another public meeting was held, in what until recently was 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 was rebuilt some fifteen years ago and is now the eastern part of Sharland's store.

The reading room was opened on Monday, Tuesday and Friday 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.

MOVING AROUND

From Mr. Platrier's house a move was made to a room behind Henry Nash's shop in Castle Street; this later became the Gardeners Arms and is now a private house. Next, the Institute moved to a room in Nash's yard, now replaced by the Civic Centre. By 1852 there were sixty members and a library of 200 volumes. Expenditure included £9 2s. 10d. for newspapers and printing, £5 7s. 6d. for the rent of the room, £3 3s. for a lecturer, and 9d. for candles at the lecture. There was no local newspaper

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nearer than the *Aylesbury News*, which was brought to Berkhamsted by a man with a dog-cart which was actually drawn by a dog. The committee ordered the long-defunct *Evening Express* to be sent by rail on the day of publication instead of waiting for it to arrive by post the following day.

Among the men who helped the Institute at this period was Charles Dickens' artist friend George Cruickshank, who had relatives at Northchurch. He addressed a meeting in the town, and a letter from the artist is kept in the reading room. The Crimean War helped to swell the 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'.

AT THE TOWN HALL

Three reading rooms had been tried and still the accommodation was inadequate. A sub-committee was formed to ascertain whether one or two empty houses were suitable, and while enquiries for new premises were being made the old market house at the top of Water Lane was burnt down. It was replaced by a much grander building 200 yards or so away, comprising a town hall, market house, committee room, and reading room. The fact that accommodation was specially provided for the Institute at public expense shows how great was the goodwill and respect it had gained.

As the town's leading society, the Institute continued to organise evening classes, lectures and entertainments. Periodically it held exhibitions which occupied the entire Town Hall building; every encouragement was given to amateur artists and craftsmen, and prizes and medals were awarded. At the exhibition of 1886, opened by Earl Brownlow and lasting ten days, electric light was brought into practical use for the first time in Berkhamsted.

As early as 1869 some members of the Institute asked for a billiards and smoking room, but no accommodation was available until 1890, when the Town Hall Committee, having added the Sessions Hall, allowed the Institute to use the large room below that hall. It was furnished at a cost of £75, the contents including a billiards table, two packs of cards --and six spittoons!

At a later date, when more is known about future plans, another article will deal with the more recent history of the Institute.