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‘For the last many years in England everybody has  
been educating the people, but they have  
forgotten to find them any books’

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# Context

- The origins of the Mechanics' Institute Movement can be traced back to 1799 when George Birkbeck was appointed Professor of Natural Philosophy at the Anderson Institution in Glasgow,
- The aim of the Institution was to provide lectures to 'men whose situation in early life has precluded the possibility of acquiring even the smallest portion of scientific knowledge',
- Glasgow MI was opened on July 5 1823 with Birkbeck as its first president,
- The London Mechanics' Institution was established in the same year.

- With the success of the Anderson Institution, mechanics' institutes were also established in Edinburgh, Leeds Liverpool and Manchester,
- From the mid-1820s, the Movement spread across the whole of Britain and by 1850 there were over 600 institutes of various sizes in both urban and rural areas.

# The Distribution of Mechanics' Institutes across the British Isles : 1850



# Debates

Historians have argued that the Movement was a failure:

- That they were not patronised by the working-classes but by professionals who had more than a passing interest in science,
- That they were short-lived,
- Those that did survive, became places of entertainment.

# Mechanics' Institutes Libraries

The House of Commons Committee on Public Libraries *Report*, published in 1849, identified that there were only three provincial cities which had libraries open to the public without subscription fees; Chetham's Library in Manchester, Preston (1757) and Glasgow (1785). All other general town libraries identified in the *Report* were not public ones as in 'free to everyone' but restricted to private members

In fact....

- Many were patronised by the working-classes,
- They were short-lived but often re-opened when subjects were offered that were relevant to the working classes,
- Some of those that did survive, did become places of entertainment but others went on to become technical colleges and universities.



- It was estimated that by the mid-nineteenth century there were 700 mechanics' institutes, literary institutes, athenaeums, mutual improvement societies and associated organisations, with over 120,000 members.
- Each institute had a library and, initially, held book stock on scientific literature. By the mid-nineteenth century they had between them 800,000 volumes which were issued over 2 million times a year.

- Black identifies that when public libraries were first considered in Britain during the 1830s and 1840s, it was the 'middle-class reformers who provided libraries to counter-attract workers from the drink which increased crime, secondary poverty and expenditure on policing and other measures of containment'.
- With the expansion of the mechanics' institute movement, there was wider access to general education and books and by the mid nineteenth century there has been an increase in working-class readership.

- In her novel *Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life* published in 1848, Elizabeth Gaskell highlights the enthusiasm amongst weavers for learning who were accessing literature:

There is a class of men in Manchester, but they are scattered all over the manufacturing districts of Lancashire...in the neighbourhood of Oldham there are weavers, common hand-loom weavers, who throw the shuttle with unceasing sound, though Newton's *Principia* lies open on the loom, to be snatched at in work hours, but revelled over in meal times, or at night. Mathematical problems are received with interest, and studied with absorbing attention by many a broad-spoken common-looking factory-hand.

- The House of Commons Select Committee on Public Libraries *Report* of 1849 noted that there was a particularly large demand for fiction from members of mechanics' institutes. Scientific textbooks had become 'outnumbered by works of fiction, travel and general literature'. However, St Claire acknowledges that many mechanics' institute libraries held a wide range of books:

on science and technology, some simplified, but by no means were all educational or vocational. Many mechanics' institute libraries had copies of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Gibbon's *Rome*, and the expensive books of modern travel; some donated, but most bought with institute funds.

- The introduction of newspapers to libraries of mechanics' institutes supported additional sources of knowledge through providing weekly newspapers and monthly journals. They provided 'much incidental general education, and encouraged the habit of reading'.

- The Village Library was founded in 1856, some six years after the passing of the Public Libraries Act, 'to give the rural districts of the county the same library facilities as were supplied in towns by Mechanics' Institutes'.
- The Yorkshire Union was serious about setting up a circulating village library, as £135 was raised for setting up such a scheme which was referred to as the Village Itinerating Library.

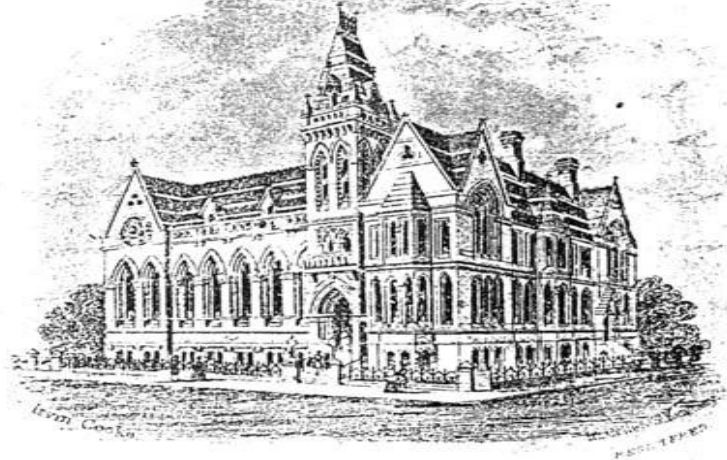
- Kelly states that it was assumed that the 1850 Act ‘was a magic wand that brought a library service into being overnight’. He highlights that the powers of the Act were exceedingly limited and inadequate and were ‘permissive not compulsory’.
- With the passing of the 1850 Act, many mechanics’ institute committees believed they were in a vulnerable position. They feared there would be a substantial drop in membership and, with it, revenue. As previously mentioned, libraries had been the lifeline of the movement.

- Middlesbrough Mechanics' Institute Library, for example, was only taken over by the town in 1873 under the 1850 Act. Although the Committee opposed this decision, it did accept that there would be more choice of books for all residents in the town. It agreed to hand over the reading room and librarian's house in support of the town's free library.
- The mechanics' institutes continued to make a substantial contribution to working-class readership. Few public libraries had their own buildings to begin with. Sometimes there was the offer of a local mechanics; institute to 'surrender its premises, either free or at a modest charge, on the understanding that the service it had formerly provided for its members would now become public responsibility'.



- The Technical Instruction Act of 1889 also had an impact on mechanics' institutes. It gave local authorities powers to raise a penny rate in support of technical instruction, taking responsibility for what subjects should be taught, and establish science and art colleges; the latter being approved through the Science and Art Department.
- The Local Taxation Act in 1890 funded these initiatives, raising money through customs and excise duties on spirits, often referred to as '*whisky money*'. Government was now at last taking responsibility for funding adult and technical education. Thus, those mechanics' institutes that were still in operation in the mid-1890s, with or without their libraries, often became local authority technical schools and later further education colleges and universities.

- Carnegie donated money to towns across Britain where they were enthusiastic about setting up their own libraries including several that had already had mechanics' institutes.
- At Skipton in the Yorkshire Dales, for example, Carnegie, provided £3,000 in 1903 to build and furnish a local library, which shared the same building as the Institute. He also donated £10,000 to establish a public library in Keighley, following a meeting with his friend Sir Swire Smith, who was President of the mechanics' institute.
- Smith convinced Carnegie that even though the town's mechanics' institute was being well-utilised, there was a desperate need for a public library. Under the Free Library Act, the Borough of Keighley was able to give land for the building which was located directly across the road from the Institute.



MECHANICS INSTITUTION  
AND  
SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND ART,  
KEIGHLEY.



# Summary

- The mechanics' institute movement, which put much importance on its libraries, had certainly not 'forgotten to find them any books'.
- The village library schemes, similar to the one set up by the Yorkshire Union, provided much needed education to the rural adult population in areas where mechanics' institutes did not exist, supporting mental improvement through the loan of their books.
- Mechanics institutes libraries provided a variety of fiction and books relevant for the courses they offered.
- Even after their decline, with more State finances and intervention of adult education and free public libraries, mechanics' institutes still had a part to play through offering their buildings and donating their general books to support their local free library, often becoming THE library in the town such as the one at Accrington in Lancashire.

Based on an article,

‘For the last many years in England everybody has been educating the people, but they have forgotten to find them any book’: The Mechanics’ Institute Library Movement and its Contribution to Working-Class Adult Education during the Nineteenth Century’, *Library and Information History*, Vol.29 No 4, November 2013, 272-86.