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The contributions to early university education  
made by the mechanics' institute movement

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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.

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.

# University Extension Schemes

- The idea of university extension courses as a form of adult education evolved during the later 1860s, with the idea of establishing local colleges of higher education.
- The mechanics' institute movement was ideally situated to respond to this and it was no coincidence that most of the support came from the north, where the Lancashire and Cheshire Union and the Yorkshire Unions of MIs had good reputations for supporting technical education through the Department of Science and Art and the Society of Arts.
- The London press referred to those who attended such classes as 'the sturdy artisans of the North'.



- The idea of offering university courses is attributed to Arthur Henfrey who wrote an article entitled ‘Society of Arts on Industrial Instruction’, and which was published in the *Annual Report of the Yorkshire Union* for 1855,
- He believed it was important for mechanics’ institutes to be ‘converted into colleges’ where there was the opportunity for working-class men to receive university level industrial training.

- University extension courses were offered initially by the established Universities of Oxford and Cambridge from 1873, predominately delivered in northern towns, but also in the Midlands,
- Both Universities 'were proud of their northern dependencies; through them they secured a connection with centres of trade and manufacturing' with Oxford predominantly responsible for supporting centres in the textile and engineering districts of Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire and Cambridge concentrating on the North East, taking in the mining communities, Newcastle and as far north as the Borders.

- In 1874, university extension courses were being promoted and delivered at the Keighley Institute on political economy and were ‘welcomed as an important educational movement’.
- Darlington, Hartlepool West, Middlesbrough and Stockton Institutes in the North East were associated with a scheme, run through Durham and Cambridge Universities. Courses were offered in political economy, history, mining and geology.

## **Yorkshire Union Mechanics' Institutes that were part of the University Extension Scheme**

Barnsley	Hartlepool	Pontefract	Sunderland
Bradford	Hebden Bridge	Ripon	Thirsk
Cleckheaton	Heckmondwike	Rotherham	Todmorden
Doncaster	Huddersfield	Scarborough	Whitby
Dewsbury	Hull	Sheffield	
Filey	Ilkley	Shipley	
Halifax	Keighley	Skipton	
Harrogate	Leeds	Sowerby Bridge	
York	Middlesbrough	Stockton	

# Centres outside Yorkshire

Accrington	Bury	Manchester	Runcorn
Alderley Edge	Camborne	Matlock	Southampton
Altrincham	Cheltenham	Moston	South Shields
Ancoats	Chester	Nantwich	Stafford
Ashton	Colchester	Oldham	Tunbridge Wells
Bath	Darlaston	Pontypool	Warrington
Birmingham	Gloucester	Pucklechurch	Whitehaven
Bolton	Guildford	Reading	Winton
Bournemouth	Hove	Redruth	Workington
Brighton	Hyde	Rhyl	Co-operative Society
Bristol	Lewes	Rochdale	

- In 1887, in response to the Samuelson Commission, the Technical Schools (Scotland) Act was passed providing government funding for technical education. As a result, Scotland introduced University Extension courses through Cambridge University,
- By the 1880s, Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Stockton were associated with a scheme, run through Durham and Cambridge universities. Courses were offered in Political Economy, History, Mining and Geology.

# External Examination Boards at the Huddersfield Technical School and Mechanics' Institute in 1891

Subject	Students	Examination Board
Cloth Weaving	138	City & Guilds London Institute
Cotton Spinning	10	City & Guilds London Institute
Dyeing	24	City & Guilds London Institute
Engineering & Building	197	City & Guilds London Institute
Chemistry	213	The Science & Art Department
Mathematics	163	The Science & Art Department
Physics & Biology	146	The Science & Art Department
Art	418	The Science & Art Department
English	27	London University Extension Course
French & German	149	London University Extension Course
Latin	21	London University Extension Course
Shorthand & Bookkeeping	51	Education Department
Elementary Classes	129	Education Department

- 1889 Technical Instruction Act
- 1890 Local Tax Act (*whisky money*)
- Victoria University, comprising of colleges in Leeds, Liverpool and Owen's Manchester, that had previously been mechanics' institutes, became universities in their own right.
- Others, such as Huddersfield became colleges of technology, separate to the local technical college, and became polytechnics and post-1992 universities.
- Many colleges can trace their origins back the local mechanics' institute such as Wigan and District Mining and Technical College which offered London University degrees in mining.



# Summary

- Thus, as further evidence of their success, mechanics' institutes often offered university extension schemes,
- University extension schemes provided lectures in provincial mechanics' institutes and were the forerunners of degree-level courses for adults.
- Many became technical and further education colleges,
- In the North, for example, institutes at Huddersfield, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester, all went on to become universities in their own right.

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