Historic England

Mechanics' Institutes

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

This introduction sets out the origins and evolution of the mechanics institute, a nineteenth century phenomenon, emerging from the 1820s and continuing into the years preceding the First World War. The institutes were the product of the Industrial Revolution which had created demand for a workforce to manage its machinery, to tend, repair and improve the complex mechanisation that revolutionised our output. They provided education for the working man through lending libraries, lecture theatres, class rooms and laboratories and often included in the mix of courses and technical material, wider opportunities for learning and betterment. The concept was a successful one and by mid-century there were several hundred mechanics institutes gracing England's major urban centres. A significant proportion were purpose-built, showing an investment in the nation's workforce and the priority given to the initiative. Around 75 are listed, at least one third of which have found a compatible re-use and continue to illustrate, in their dignified variety, the commendable efforts made towards adult education in Queen Victoria's reign.

This guidance note has been written by Ian West and edited by Deborah Mays.

It is one is of several guidance documents that can be accessed at HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/

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Front cover
The Burnley Mechanics' Institute (now Theatre)
Manchester Road, Lancashire, listed Grade II*.

Contents

Introduction

The Mechanics' Institute movement was conceived at the end of the 18th century as a means of improving the literacy and numeracy of working people and providing them with some basic technical education. It played a vital but often overlooked part in the development of adult education. A study of Mechanics' Institute buildings is complicated by the fact that many institutions with similar or overlapping objectives were known by different names, including Literary and Scientific Institutes, Reading Rooms, Useful Knowledge Societies, Athenaeums and Lyceums; many Mechanics' Institutes also changed their names during their lifetimes. It is estimated that, by the second half of the 19th century, there were around 1,200 such institutions in Great Britain and, whilst by no means all of these had their own purpose-built premises, a great many did, funded either by public subscription or by wealthy benefactors. In addition to classrooms, most Mechanics' Institutes included, as a minimum, a large hall for lectures and demonstrations, a library and reading room. Some later examples also provided social and welfare facilities.

As publicly-funded provision of child and adult education and libraries grew from the late 19th century, the educational role of Mechanics' Institutes became redundant. Their often imposing and distinctive buildings have suffered a variety of fates, with many examples demolished and others adapted for commercial or residential use. In a few cases, the new technical colleges took over the former Mechanics' Institutes' premises whilst many others have been retained as public libraries and for other community uses. This document should therefore be read in conjunction with the IHA for early public libraries: https://HistoricEngland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-english-public-library-1850-1939/

A small number of these buildings have continued in use, at least until recently, as working men's clubs. Many of the successor organisations running former Mechanics' Institutes face significant challenges in maintaining premises which are generally too large for their current uses, which places these buildings at risk. Whilst a number of historical studies have been made of the growth of these institutions, very little research has been carried out into Mechanics' Institutes as a distinct building type.

1 Historical Background

The precursor to the Mechanics' Institute movement is generally regarded to have been Anderson's Institution, founded by John Anderson in Glasgow in 1795; this was described as a 'university open to all' and it eventually became the University of Strathclyde. One of its early lecturers was the doctor, George Birkbeck, who, in 1799, instituted a series of classes aimed at mechanics and other tradesmen, which quickly became popular. Birkbeck left to work in a number of English cities before arriving in London in 1806 but the Glasgow classes continued. Around 1823, their participants broke away from Anderson's Institution to form the Glasgow Mechanics' Institution, the first known use of this term. During this period there were attempts in various parts of the country to form such bodies by artisans who were frustrated by their exclusion, usually by the cost of subscription, from established bodies such as Literary and Philosophical Institutions.

The movement gained momentum with the foundation in 1823 of *The Mechanics' Magazine* by J C Robertson. Later that same year, Robertson, Birkbeck, William Cobbett and others initiated the London Mechanics' Institute (which eventually became Birkbeck College). The concept spread rapidly around Britain and overseas: one study has identified over 700 institutions with 'mechanic' or a similar word in their titles in England up to 1851, and many more are known to have been formed later in the 19th century. The highest density of these was in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where 125 were recorded. Surprisingly, many sprung up in the market towns of rural counties, far away from the industrial areas that are generally supposed to have been their heartland.

Many idealistic early promoters of the movement believed that Mechanics' Institutes should be founded and run by the working men whom they were intended to serve but there were often practical as well as political barriers to this. For one thing, it was hard for working men to secure suitable premises, even to rent, without the support of members of the local middle class. In practice, the foundation of most of these institutions was promoted by local industrialists, clergy and other members of the professional class, who were often as keen on providing a more wholesome alternative to public houses for gatherings and entertainment as they were to improving the educational standard of working people. Hence, although some Mechanics' Institutes, particularly in the early days of the movement, were formed by the members themselves, they mostly represented an imposition of a means of 'improvement' on the working class rather than a genuine attempt at self-improvement by their members. The governing committees of most Mechanics' Institutes were dominated by industrialists and members of the professional classes, anxious to ensure that these bodies did not become centres for promoting radical political ideas. This dilution of the original ideal prompted a scornful comment from Friedrick Engels in 1850:

Figure 1
The Witham Testimonial, Barnard Castle (2017), built by public subscription in 1846 to house the town's Mechanics' Institute.

'Mechanics Institutes offer classes in that brand of political economy which takes free competition as its God...The students are taught to be subservient to the existing political and social order.'

Evidence suggests that these institutions did mainly attract the skilled manual workers for which they were intended, although from a wider range of trades than their name implies. In 1835, only around 25% of members of the London Mechanics' Institute came from what would now be regarded as the lower middle class – clerks, shopkeepers and other small businessmen – with the remainder being mainly skilled working men. Large employers would often pay a bulk subscription which allowed all their employees to use the institutions' facilities. Originally, few Mechanics' Institutes encouraged or allowed female members, although this changed towards the end of the 19th century. Where women were admitted, they often had restricted access: at Shrewsbury, for example, women paid half the subscription of men but were only allowed to attend lectures and use the library. After 1850, many larger institutions started to offer special classes for women, particularly in English. Subscriptions were typically in the range of 10s (50p) to £1 per year for adults, and significantly less for youths, but this was often beyond the means of unskilled manual workers. In some larger towns and cities, institutions with lower subscriptions, such as Lyceums, were formed to cater for the poorer members of the working class; these generally had a greater emphasis on entertainment than Mechanics' Institutes.

Mechanics' Institutes invariably offered classes in English (language and literature) and mathematics, including geometry, at various levels. Most also taught languages (mainly French, but sometimes other languages including Latin), technical drawing and art. Understandably, the classes available reflected the needs of local employers: for example, the many institutions around Stoke-on-Trent taught decorative arts to workers in the ceramics industries. The subjects of lectures were sometimes dictated by the availability of lecturers – committee members and other prominent local citizens were prevailed upon to lecture for free about their particular interests or their travels. However, a cohort of professional lecturers soon grew up, touring the country lecturing on scientific and other subjects. Concerts and exhibitions of art and curiosities were also highly popular. Many Mechanics' Institutes banded together in regional unions, through which they shared books, teachers and expertise.

New institutions continued to be formed right up to the last quarter of the 19th century, but these tended to avoid the term 'Mechanics' in their names, and many of the original Mechanics' Institutes also dropped this word around this time. These later institutions sometimes catered for children as well as adults and had a greater emphasis on entertainment than the earlier examples, with concerts and dances becoming more common than lectures. Their buildings also sometimes incorporated refreshment rooms public baths and other leisure facilities. In a further break from the original ideal, many institutions founded in the late 19th century were effectively a form of personal memorial, funded either by a single wealthy individual during their lifetime or by their estate after their death, and bore that individual's name. This funding of a memorial institution by the individual concerned is subtly different from earlier examples, such as the Mechanics' Institute in Barnard Castle (Figure 1), which was housed in the Witham Testimonial, a building erected by public subscription in 1846 to commemorate the local philanthropist Henry Witham; one of the chief subscribers was local landowner John Bowes, who to go on to found the Bowes Museum with his wife. The Technical Instruction Act of 1889 gave local authorities responsibilities to promote and fund adult education, which they often did via existing institutions such as Mechanics' Institutes, and hence some of these formed the foundation of important further and higher education institutions.

2 Development of the Building Type

Most Mechanics' Institutes started by renting rooms on a short-term basis when they needed them, often in public houses, Nonconformist chapels or above shops. However, almost invariably, it quickly became necessary for them to find permanent accommodation in which they could hold classes and house their libraries and reading rooms. In some cases, institutions chose to rent or buy an existing property and adapt it to their needs, but a significant proportion opted to build their own premises, particularly if they wished to have a space large enough for public lectures, many of which attracted audiences of 500 or more.

One institution which operated successfully for many decades in an existing building with minimal adaptation was the one in Shrewsbury, founded in 1825 and initially occupying a variety of rented rooms in the town. By the 1840s, with a membership in excess of 200, it leased from Shrewsbury Corporation the upper floor of the Old Market Hall, a late 16th-century building with open arcading at ground level. This housed rooms for classes, a library of over 1,200 volumes and a reading room open from noon to 10 pm Monday to Saturday. These premises provided no space for public lectures, however, so these were held in some other nearby space such as a chapel or theatre.

The Shrewsbury example was not typical, and most institutions taking over an existing building needed to make substantial alterations and additions to accommodate their very specific needs. For example, the hugely successful and influential London Mechanics' Institution operated for a year from a Presbyterian chapel before taking a lease on an existing property, Southampton Buildings, in Chancery Lane in 1824. This building housed classrooms, library, reading room and, later, a laboratory. The following year, the Institution purchased the adjacent vacant plot of land and built a lecture hall with seating for over 1,000 people. The institution, renamed the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution, moved to larger premises on Fetter Lane in 1885.

The first Mechanics' Institute to have its own purpose-built premises was probably Manchester. This was founded in 1824 by a group of local manufacturers, many of whom were Unitarians. It initially rented a suite of rooms in Cross Street for its classrooms, library and reading room, using a theatre and a chapel for lectures. Shareholders subscribed £7,000 for a building in Cooper Street, which opened in 1827, with a lecture theatre capable of seating over 900 people. These premises were upgraded in 1848, with the addition of more classrooms and gas lighting, but this still failed to keep pace with growing demand and a library which held over 12,000 volumes. A new building, designed by J E Gregan, was built in nearby Princess Street, to which the Institute moved in 1854 (Figure 2). This building held the first meeting of the Trades Union Congress in 1868. The Institute became the Manchester Technical School in 1883, the precursor to UMIST.

The Institute's original Cooper Street building was demolished in the 1970s but the Princess Street premises survive, listed Grade II*, and houses a conference centre. The Manchester Mechanics' Institution thrived throughout the 19th century despite the formation of a break-away institution in 1829 and the erection in 1838 of an Athenaeum 'for the advancement and diffusion of knowledge' (now part of the city's Art Gallery) almost next door.

Like Manchester, Bradford was a town which grew hugely in population and wealth during the 19th century due the its textile industries, and the evolution of its Mechanics' Institute followed a similar path. It was founded in 1832, with the support of prominent citizens including Titus Salt, and met in a succession of rented premises until 1840 when, with a membership of over 500, it moved to purpose-built premises on a triangular site at the junction of Leeds Road and Well Street. The ground floor housed the library, reading room, exhibition and meeting rooms and the first floor was given over to a large lecture theatre with tiered seating. The basement housed two classrooms and cellars which were later converted into a laboratory. The surviving architects' drawings show decorative detail and specially-designed items of furniture which equal those of any country house. The year after the building was opened, it held an exhibition of paintings and curiosities which attracted over 140,000 visitors. By 1869, membership had risen to over 1,500 and larger premises were required. A new building in a style described as 'Bradford Italianate' or

Figure 2
Manchester Mechanics' Institute (2000), built in 1854, meeting place of the first Trades Union Congress in 1868 and now a conference venue.

Figure 3
The second Bradford Mechanics' Institute, soon after its completion in 1871; it was demolished *c* 1972.

Figure 4
The lecture theatre of the second Bradford Mechanics' Institute, completed 1871 (date unknown).

Venetian, was erected on Bridge Street at a cost of £36,000 and opened in 1871 (Figure 3). The main lecture theatre (Figure 4) held 1,500 people and the classrooms, laboratories and art room could accommodate 700 students. By the early 20th century, the accommodation included a smoking room, a ladies' lounge and a rooftop restaurant. Despite being listed Grade II, this grand building was compulsorily purchased by Bradford Council in 1972 and demolished to make way for building society offices. The Bradford Mechanics' Institute still survives as an organisation elsewhere in the city, running adult classes and operating a private subscription library.

One of the earliest surviving Mechanics' Institute buildings is in Liverpool, founded as the Liverpool Mechanics' School of Art in 1825, changing its name to Mechanics' Institute in 1832. Its grand Greek Revival building in Mount Street (Figure 5), designed by the prolific local architect A H Holme and built with the support of local merchants and bankers, opened in 1835. Art became an increasing focus of this institution by the middle of the 19th century, when the name changed again, to The Liverpool Institute and School of Art. A separate building for the Art School was constructed in 1882, and the original building served as a boys' high school (its many distinguished former pupils include Paul McCartney and George Harrison) until it became the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts in the 1990s. The Grade II listed building has been greatly altered internally but its exterior still betrays original purpose, with the (slightly misleading) inscription on its portico 'Liverpool Institute and School of Arts 1825'.

A similarly grand city-centre building survives in Leeds. The Mechanics' Institute here was founded in 1824, promoted by a group of prominent woollen manufacturers and other businessmen, including Benjamin Gott (who was its first president) John Marshall and Edward Baines. Its original premises on Park Row consisted only of one classroom and a library. Its membership remained relatively small until the 1840s when it merged with the Leeds Literary Institution, after which it acquired larger premises. At the start of the 1860s, the architect Cuthbert Brodrick, who also designed the nearby Town Hall, was commissioned to design a new building in Cookridge Street (now Millennium Square), which took five years to build and cost £20,000 (Figure 6). At the centre of this French Second Empire style building was a lecture hall seating 1,500 people, with a balcony supported on cast iron columns. Around this were arranged on two floors the library, reading room, classrooms, laboratory, art studio and various other facilities, including a

Figure 5 (top)
Liverpool Mechanics' Institute (2003). This was completed in 1835 and is now home to the Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts.

Figure 6 (bottom)
Leeds Mechanics' Institute, built in the 1860s, which now houses the Leeds City Museum.

dining room. The Institute became Leeds College of Art in 1903 and the interior was been much altered through the 20th century, with the lecture hall used as a theatre. It is listed Grade II* and now houses the city's museum, with the central circular lecture theatre converted into exhibition space.

In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a Mechanics' Institute was formed in 1824, with George Stephenson as its first chairman. Around 1865, it moved into impressive new premises, about which *The Builder* reported: 'The new building, which has been designed by Mr Thomas Oliver, architect, stands on a piece of ground in New Bridge Street … the style is Italian. The interior will consist of six large sized classrooms, a library, a lecture room, a news room, a "smoke room" and an extensive corridor leading from the entrance to the grand staircase.' This later became home to the City's main library but was demolished in the 1960s. Happily, such a fate did not befall the even grander premises of the North of England Institute of Mining Engineers, built around 1870 in Westgate Street, with a large library, lecture theatre and classrooms, which is now the Grade II*-listed Neville Hall and Wood Memorial Hall. This institution, first established in 1852, was more of a specialised learned society for mining engineers than a Mechanics' Institute, but it played an important role in the education of men at all levels in the coal mining industry and thus merits consideration alongside more conventional examples of Mechanics' Institutes.

The examples described above – homes to large and prosperous institutions in major industrial urban centres – are not typical of the many hundreds of Mechanics' Institutes buildings constructed in England during the 19th century, which were more modest in scale, but sometimes still grand in style. The Londonderry Institute in Seaham, County Durham is one of the smaller surviving examples. Founded as a Literary and Scientific Institute in 1846, its single-storey building was designed by Thomas Oliver (who also designed Newcastle-upon-Tyne's Mechanics' Institute) and consisted of a small main hall, reading room and library (Figure 7). Many similarly modest institution buildings were constructed, often housing a library, reading room and perhaps just one classroom, other

Figure 7
The Londonderry Institute, Seaham, County Durham (1983) built in 1846 and now converted to residential use.

premises such as theatres or chapels being rented when required for lectures. The absence of a large lecture hall made these buildings easier to adapt for other uses, and it is likely that many examples survive, largely unrecognised. However, perhaps the most distinctive class of Mechanics' Institutes are those which fall in size between these two extremes, many examples of which survive, particularly in towns in former textile manufacturing areas, such as Accrington, Bacup, Batley, Burnley and Huddersfield. One which survives relatively unaltered is at Marsden, West Yorkshire (Figure 8). The Mechanics' Institute here was founded in 1841 and operated for many years from a room above a smithy. By the 1850s, its membership and library were outgrowing this, so subscriptions were sought for a purpose-designed building, expected to cost around £1,000. The resulting Mechanics' Hall, designed by Halifax architect John Hogg, opened in 1861 and cost around £2,500, leaving the Institute struggling with debts for many years. The design of this building follows the most common pattern adopted by such institutions in the mid-19th century, being rectangular in plan, with the ground floor housing the library, reading room and classrooms. The double-height upper storey was devoted to a hall which it was claimed could comfortably seat 1,000 people, with a gallery at one end. This lecture hall had a level floor, rather than the tiered seating provided in many earlier examples, which would have been more versatile, allowing it to be used for exhibitions and, later, social events such as balls. The layout of the ground floor space has since been altered and the balcony of the hall (Figure 9) has been blocked off but the building, listed Grade II, retains much of its original form and character.

Another well-preserved example is the Witham Testimonial in Barnard Castle (Figure 1), the foundation of which in 1846 was described above. The ground floor originally housed the library, reading room, offices and a dispensary, with a relatively modestly-sized lecture room on the first floor. This evidently proved inadequate for larger public events, so the Institute's committee built a separate music hall building to the rear in the 1860s.

Figures 8 (top) and 9 (bottom)
Top: Marsden Mechanics' Institute, West Yorkshire (2017), completed in 1861 and still home to a public library, classrooms and a large meeting hall.
Bottom: The meeting hall at Marsden Mechanics' Institute (2017).

The original plan of the Swindon Mechanics' Institute, opened in 1854, shows some interesting variants from the common model which Marsden represents. New Swindon Mechanics' Institution, as it was originally called, was founded with the encouragement of the Great Western Railway in

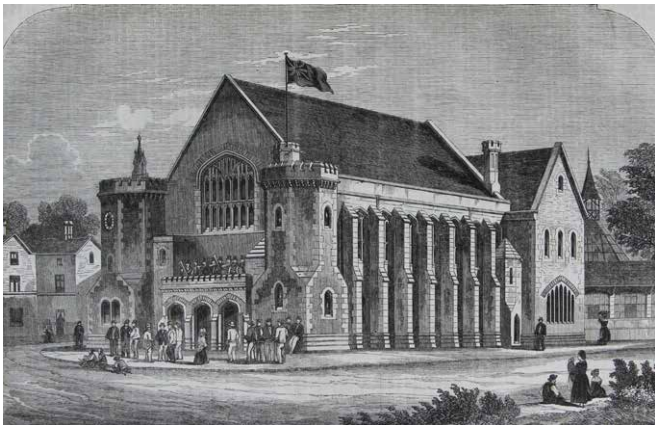

Figure 10
New Swindon Mechanics' Institute, 1854.

Figure 11
The new reading room at Swindon Mechanics' Institute in the late 19th century.

1844, with Daniel Gooch, then Superintendent of the Swindon railway works, as its first chairman. It met initially in GWR premises then, in 1853, the railway company provided a site for a dedicated building within its New Swindon development at a peppercorn rent. However, a separate company was formed to build and run the new institution building, with shares being bought by many prominent local citizens, not just the senior figures within the GWR. The architect was Edward Roberts of London and the building, which cost around £4,000, opened in 1855 and merited an illustrated article in *The Builder* of 1st July 1854 (Figure 10). The ground floor housed the reading room, a small book room, a coffee room, committee room, operatives dining room and a bathroom with eight baths. Curiously, it did not include any classrooms, so class teaching must have continued to use GWR premises. The upper floor housed the lecture hall. Perhaps uniquely, at the south end of the building was an octagonal covered market, with space for 34 market stalls. This was swept away around 1890 when the Institute's premises were extended, creating a much larger reading room (Figure 11) and library on the ground floor and converting the lecture hall into a conventional theatre. This was used by both amateur and professional groups through much of the 20th century. The library closed in 1961 and was converted into a social club for railway employees. The subsequent history of this building is described in the next section of this document.

There are several surviving examples of late 19th century institutions, built to house recreational as well as educational activities, including the Brassey Institute, Hastings (1880), the Florence Institute, Liverpool (1889) and St Bride's Institute, London (1884). One of the most impressive of these is the Whitworth Institute in Darley Dale, Derbyshire (Figure 12), built around 1890 by the widow of the Manchester industrialist Sir Joseph Whitworth, who lived nearby. In addition to the usual library, reading room and lecture hall, this included an indoor swimming pool and billiard room.

The design of many of the larger urban institutions was often subject to open competitions, so the resulting buildings reflected the tastes of the prominent local citizens who were their most influential promoters. It is therefore unsurprising that these buildings used the same local architects and styles as other public buildings in the area, demonstrated by the Italianate examples in Bradford and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The style of many of the smaller installations was undoubtedly influenced by the preferences of the people who were most active in promoting and funding their construction, many of whom were Nonconformists, which may explain why so many are similar in appearance to large chapel buildings, as seen, for example, in the Gothic Revival style of Swindon. Whilst no single architectural style can be ascribed to

Mechanics' Institutes, classical motifs, such as pediments and columns can be seen in many examples, such as at Liverpool and Seaham; this classical style has been popular for many buildings associated with learning all over the world from the 18th century onwards.

Surviving Mechanics' Institutes have generally retained few original internal features, leaving us to rely on historic photographs to understand these details. Their libraries established the practices which were later adopted by early public libraries, with books kept in store rather than on open shelving, and ordered by readers from the printed catalogues. Reading rooms often had high sloping desks for newspapers and periodicals, at which readers stood rather than sat, as shown in the late-19th century photograph of the new reading room at Swindon (Figure 11). One such reading desk from the later Bradford Mechanics' Institute survives in the Institute's present library.

Lighting was an important consideration in the design of Mechanics' Institutes, with reading rooms often furnished with large windows to maximise daylight. However, the main use of these facilities was in the evenings, after the end of the working day, so Mechanics' Institutes were amongst the earliest non-industrial buildings to use gas lighting extensively indoors, at a time when few people, even relatively wealthy ones, had effective artificial lighting in their homes. Architects also gave much attention to the ventilation of these buildings, as they did with other public buildings during this period. In some cases, the provision of lighting and ventilation could be combined through the use of gas 'sun lamps', which drew fresh air into the room and exhausted the products of combustion outside the building. The original design of the Swindon Mechanics' Institute (Figure 10) incorporated a pair of chimney-like towers to draw air out of the building, which were enlarged during the later rebuilding (Figure 13).

Figure 12
The Whitworth Institute, Darley Dale, Derbyshire (2017). This was built by the estate of Joseph Whitworth around 1890 and housed recreational as well as educational facilities.

3 Change and the Future

As explained above, the growth in public funding of adult education, promoted by the 1889 Technical Education Act, eventually brought Mechanics' Institutes educational role to an end, although some of their buildings continued to fulfil a function in further or higher education. Today, at least 74 buildings in England originally constructed to house Mechanics' Institutes or similar institutions are listed; there are undoubtedly very many more unlisted examples which can only be identified through further research. Of these listed examples, 39 are still fulfilling parts of their original function: five continue to be used for educational purposes, 11 are entirely occupied by public libraries and 23 are venues for community events and classes, in some cases also including a library or other municipal function. A further eight former Mechanics' Institutes remain in some form of public use as museums, art galleries or council offices. Often, the smaller examples have been easier to adapt for other purposes than those Institute buildings which include a large meeting space. For example, Seaham's Londonderry Institute (Figure 7) has been converted to residential use, and the domestic-scale Mechanics' Institute at Newbrough, Northumberland, erected in 1854 and given to the Women's Institute in 1949, now serves as a bunkhouse for walkers following Hadrian's Wall.

Two of the most successful examples which have sustained a combination of original purposes are Marsden, West Yorkshire and Barnard Castle, County Durham. At Marsden (Figure 8), the building, now owned by a local community trust, has rooms for meetings and adult classes, together with a public library and the offices of a theatre company on the ground floor whilst the main hall, largely unchanged from its original form (Figure 9) holds functions and performances. Barnard Castle's Witham Testimonial, now simply called 'The Witham' (Figure 1) is also owned by a local trust. It operates as an arts centre with a smaller venue/meeting room in the original building, together with a gallery and rooms hosting classes in various aspects of the arts for adults and young people; the 1860s music hall building to the rear has been recently restored as a theatre. The future for many of the other buildings which remain in some form of institutional use – particularly libraries and community centres – may be less certain, with their operators facing the challenges of maintaining historic properties which are invariably much larger than their present use requires, during a period of austerity.

Figure 13
Swindon Mechanics Institute (2017).

Out of the group of 74 listed Mechanics' Institute buildings, 23 have been converted to private use, either commercial, such as offices, shops or public houses, or for residential purposes, so their external form has been preserved, even if some internal features have been lost. Four are currently disused, of which two – Swindon and the Bridport Literary and Scientific Institute – are currently (May 2017) on the Heritage at Risk Register. The history of the Swindon Mechanics' Institute (Figure 13) has been described briefly above. The main hall ceased to be used as a theatre in 1980 but the social club continued to operate until the railway works closed in 1986. The building has passed through the hands of a number of owners, whose plans for re-use were all met with vigorous opposition from residents of the surrounding Railway Village. A building preservation trust is negotiating to take over and restore the building, which is currently in a seriously decayed condition. It is perhaps the most evocative example of a type of building which once played a vital role, not just in their local community but in the development of adult education in Britain and beyond.

4 Further Reading

Almost all of the published work on Mechanics' Institutes is historical in nature, with little attention having been given to their built heritage. The most comprehensive account of the early development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement can be found in Thomas Kelly *George Birkbeck – pioneer of adult education* (1957), which includes a useful gazetteer of institutions in the UK, but unfortunately only covers the period up to 1851. The same period is studied in more detail for what might be considered the heartland for these institutions in Mabel Tylcote *The Mechanics' Institutes of Yorkshire and Lancashire before 1851* (1957). Thomas Kelly *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (1992) places these institutions in a wider context. A recent publication which provides an overview of the history of the movement is Martyn Walker *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond* (2017). Local historians and groups have published histories of individual institutions, such as T W Cockbill *Finest Thing Out – the story of the Mechanics' Institute at New Swindon: Part One 1843-1873* (1988). A short section in Nick Mansfield's English Heritage publication *Buildings of the Labour Movement* (2013) briefly describes a few examples of these buildings.

The Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Inc in Australia has promoted four international conferences devoted to the study of these institutions, with the fifth due to be held in Scotland in 2021. Further details of these and proceedings of some past conferences can be found via their web site: http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mivic/mechanics-worldwide.html

5 Acknowledgements

Images

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Figure 3: *Illustrated London News* 4th October 1873

Figure 4: Bradford Mechanics' Institute Library

Figure 6: Michael Taylor, Creative Commons licence

Figure 10: *The Builder* 1st July 1854

Figure 12: STEAM

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