

BASINGSTOKE: PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES: SOCIAL LIFE & ENTERTAINMENT MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

Provision to 1870

Founded in February 1841 the Institute's aims were to instruct members in science and useful knowledge by lectures, conversation and readings, to form a library and museum and to purchase philosophical apparatus.¹ It was run by a committee of twenty-four, twelve of whom were required to be mechanics. Lectures were held on alternate Thursdays in a room in the Town Hall where twenty lectures took place in the first year, the first was entitled 'The Science of Arithmetic'. Edward Lefroy was the first President, a post he held until 1852 at which time he expressed the wish that the Institute should continue to 'exclude modern politics and polemical Divinity from lectures'.² It was mainly intended for boys who had left school and men, but ladies and children under 14 were invited to certain lectures and social functions.

Mr Lunn at Sarum House offered a room for the library which started with gifts of books, encyclopaedias and maps and ended the first year with 587 volumes. This was open every Tuesday evening when members could borrow books for a week at a time. A separate Reading Room, eventually stocked with journals and periodicals, was open Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. Yearly subscriptions were initially 8s which went towards the cost of visiting lecturers and the purchase of more books.³

By 1844 new premises were needed for the growing library so a room was hired in the premises of Henry Downs in Church Street. Ten years later, the expenditure of the Institute was exceeding its income and subscriptions were redefined, ranging from £1 to 4s per term depending on age, occupation and rights to introduce guests to lectures. The Reading Room was made more accessible being opened during the day and for six evenings a week.⁴ By 1854 the administration of the Institute was governed by Trustees to comply with the Literary and Scientific Institutions Act but within two years membership had reduced from 190 in 1852⁵ to 170.⁶ An exhibition in this year received the support of Lord Portsmouth who, as patron, subsequently contributed £5 annually and was pleased that local artisans could see works of approved craftsmen and rectify their own faults. He believed that the Institute was the 'best means of keeping working classes from the dangers of the beer house and the allurements of the tempting doctrines of Socialism and Chartism'.⁷

In 1856 measures were taken to canvass the working classes to encourage membership. Even the Railway Company was approached for possible new recruits.⁸ Evening classes were offered during the winter for Elementary Education – reading, writing and arithmetic – for boys over 10 years who had left school with classes run by gratuitous teachers. In 1857 members were encouraged to join

¹ HRO, 148M71/13/1 *unpaginated* 26 Feb 1841; 2 Mar 1841.

² HRO, 148M71/13/1 8 Oct 1850.

³ HRO, 148M71/13/1 2 Mar 1841.

⁴ HRO, 148M71/13/1 30 May 1854; HRO, 19A02/1/5.

⁵ HRO, 148M71/13/1 19 Oct 1852.

⁶ HRO, 180M88/14/4; *PO Dir, Hants, Wilts & Dorset* (1855), 15.

⁷ HRO, 180M88/2.

⁸ HRO, 148M71/13/1 17 Jul 1856.

classes for examination by the Society of Arts and the Hants & Wilts Adult Educational Society.⁹

Land was purchased in 1869 for the construction of a new building next to the Post Office¹⁰ in New Street which included a large room for concerts.¹¹ Another exhibition staged in November of that year, possibly to mark the opening of the new premises, was entitled 'The Industrial Exhibition' and contained an exhibit from Queen Victoria. She also presented the Institute with a copy of her *Journal in the Highlands* with a handwritten inscription.¹²



Reconstructed Façade of the Former
Mechanics' Institute, New Street

1870-1928

The new rooms were officially opened the following year by Canon Charles Kingsley, Rector of Eversley and author of *The Water Babies*¹³ who also gave occasional lectures. Soon after this the Institute became affiliated to the London Working Men's Club and Union¹⁴ and became known as the Mechanics' Institute and Club and had a membership of 300.¹⁵

The library contained over 2,000 volumes in 1878 and 5,000 by 1927. Ladies were admitted as full members in 1890. Chess and billiard tournaments were held as well

⁹ HRO, 148M71/13/1 3 Nov 1857.

¹⁰ HRO, 180M88/14/4.

¹¹ *White's Dir, Hants* (1878), 131; *P.O. Dir, Hants, Wilts & Dorset* (1855), 28.

¹² *Hampshire Advertiser*, 24 Nov 1869.

¹³ F.J. Baigent, J.E Millard, *A History of the Ancient Town and Manor of Basingstoke* (1889), 570.

¹⁴ *P.O. Dir, Hants, Wilts, Dorset*, (1875), 28.

¹⁵ E. Stokes, *The Making of Basingstoke* (2008), 182.

as dinners, dances and smoking concerts; a band was formed¹⁶ which played at various events in the town, particularly at the commencement of work on the Basingstoke and Alton Railway in 1898 and the annual fêtes organised by the Institute held on August Bank Holidays at Malshanger Park, the home of one time President and benefactor Lord Wyndham Portal.¹⁷

By 1904-5 the annual report stated that lectures were poorly attended. The military took over the building for several months in 1915 and caused considerable damage but contributed to the cost of redecoration and installation of electric lights. On re-opening there were only 56 members compared with 330 prior to the closure.¹⁸

Over the following decade, members were attracted by the increased outdoor recreational provision in the town and the opening of two political clubs; stationery shops offered free library facilities and most working men bought their own newspapers and had no need for the Reading Room. The Institute relied more and more on the income from the hire of the billiard tables and rooms and was criticised for being outdated, elitist and not fulfilling the original aims. The most popular books borrowed from the library were novels and the reference books were out of date.¹⁹ The original aims of the Institute were no longer being achieved. George Gage, a headmaster in the town for many years and a member of the Institute for sixty-five years said of the organisation that 'if it had not done much in the promotion of higher education it had at any rate promoted intelligence and understanding of things generally.'²⁰

By 1928 the Institute was insolvent with only 183 members, insufficient to cover expenditure on the building.²¹ In September of that year the Borough Council took over the administration preserving the premises and contents as a free library and museum until 1969 when new premises were found.²² Approval was given to subsequent occupants of New Street for the interior rooms to be altered but the front elevation was to be preserved. However, during the alterations, damage occurred beyond repair and the present building has a reconstructed façade replicating as near as possible the 1869 Institute.²³

¹⁶ *Hampshire Advertiser*, 24 Nov 1869.

¹⁷ E. Stokes, *The Making of Basingstoke* (2008), 182.

¹⁸ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 23 Oct 1915.

¹⁹ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 5 Mar 1927.

²⁰ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 25 Feb 1928.

²¹ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 25 Feb 1928.

²² E. Stokes, *The Making of Basingstoke* (2008), 182.

²³ *Basingstoke Gazette*, 16 Nov 1990.