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The Mechanics' Institutes of the Home Counties, c. 1825–70 Part One

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Introduction

The history of mechanics' institutes has become the subject of a fairly extensive literature and one which has rightly associated them chiefly with the industrial areas of the country. In 1851 only about 3 per cent of the total membership of the institutes was in the Home Counties [1]. However, the Home Counties offered scope for studying them in a region with distinctive economic and social characteristics.

The region should not simply be thought of as being merely agricultural, for the existence of industries in the countryside and in the market towns chiefly accounts for the 30 per cent or so of its working population being classified as 'industrial' in mid-Victorian censuses. Manufacturing was predominantly small-scale and consisted of cloth weaving, brewing, brick-making, printing and iron production. Agricultural produce, raw materials and fuel were marketed in regional centres such as Banbury, Bedford and Hertford. Older crafts such as lace-making and straw-plaiting occupied female and child labour in several towns, although others, such as the manufacturing of plush and horse girths, began to decline in importance in some areas during the period. In contrast, retail trades and professional services expanded considerably.

If the upper classes were largely synonymous with the nobility and large landowners, and were a relatively coherent group, the same cannot be said about the middle and working classes, the social boundaries between whom were less rigid and with more diffuse interaction in their social relationships than in factory towns. In the very top level of the middle classes were large merchants, bankers and the more substantial professional people. Constituting a lower middle class were the petty bourgeoisie of shopkeepers and small businessmen, white-collar salaried workers and the lower ranks of the professions. Amongst the working classes the great divide came with the unskilled worker and agricultural labourer, the latter earning only about 7/6d. a week in Buckinghamshire in the mid-nineteenth century and reflecting a relatively low wage region. There were wide variations in the earnings and social status of the skilled workers and no clear dividing line can be drawn between the 'labour aristocracy' and the lower middle class.

Some of the larger employers in the region made some provision for the education of their employees. Both Huntley and Palmer's biscuit factory in Reading and the Brittania agricultural machinery works in Banbury had mutual improvement societies, with classes for the 3 R's, reading rooms and libraries. Facilities for adult education were also provided by several Quaker schools. In 1851, about 2,000 pupils were attending evening schools for adults in the region, 60 per cent of whom were agricultural labourers, and in which the three R's were the most frequently studied subjects [2]. By 1867 over three-quarters of the villages in Oxfordshire were providing evening classes in the three R's and as early as 1834 the same county possessed free parochial lending libraries in 23 places [3]. Levels of literacy, however, could be low. At the railway engine workshops in Wolverton in 1840, about one-third of the men were unable to read or write [4].

Kelly identified only 30 institutes in the Home Counties [5], but about three times this number were established. The region had a relatively high proportion of small institutes, about 75 per cent of them having fewer than 100 members in 1851. With the spread of the movement into smaller towns and villages, such small membership could be expected. Nevertheless, in 1851 their total membership represented 0.57 per cent of the region's population which was slightly higher than the national average. The ratio of the number of institutes to population was relatively very favourable. There was some correlation between size of membership and that of the town. Places with less than 2,000 population rarely had less than 2 per

cent, whereas the largest towns never had more than 2 per cent of their respective populations belonging to any one institute. This was partly because the larger places had membership spread over a variety of institutes; but it would also appear that in smaller places the institutes provided more of a focus for community participation. Although many of the smaller institutes perished after a few years, about 25 per cent of them existed for more than 30 years.

Kelly suggested that there was a 'definite connection' between the growth of the institutes and the trade cycle, political and factory reform, social and labour movements. However, doubt has been thrown on such interpretations and there was little difference in the Home Counties between the numbers of institutes established in 'trough' and 'peak' years. Movements such as Chartism and co-operation were relatively weak in this region anyway. Nor was the diffusion of the institutes facilitated, as in other areas, by the creation of 'unions' of institutes. Alternative explanations will be offered.

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Their social class composition

Several of the institutes in the region like those elsewhere made provision for working class representation in their managing committees. Whilst two-thirds of the committee in Reading in 1825 was supposed to consist of mechanics and artisans, in fact only about one-third were artisans, about one-third were from the professions and the rest consisted of two weavers, a chemist, confectioner, machinist and builder. By 1828 one-third of the total members were reported as being 'working class' [6]. The institutes were clearly anxious to attract the support of workers, the institute at Banbury as late as 1867 offering union to the members of the Recreation Society of the Brittania iron works at concessionary rates.

However, as in other regions, a 'failure to attract sufficient support from those classes for whom the institute was intended' was often reported, although as the Rev. Hinton, a Baptist minister of Reading, had emphasized, they 'had nothing to do with labourers' [7]. To C. E. Prior, the relative absence of artisans was easily explained by the competing attractions of the pub which stood in marked contrast to 'the austere visage, cold room, colder company, its mummy in a case ... dusty chemical apparatus (and) temperance tracts ...' of the mechanics' institute [8]. Other reasons which have been suggested to account for this are well known, although it might be emphasized that the most general and powerful factors were apathy and an alienation from the middle-class values which the institutes came to represent.

Some institutes tried to ascertain the facts of the matter. About 15 per cent of Royston's 'mechanics, shopmen and town labourers' in 1855 belonged to the institute where they formed a similar percentage of its total membership and between 1856–62, mechanics, domestic servants and youth averaged a quarter of the membership. In 1869, nearly half of their members were 'artisans, assistants and apprentices' [9]. Sixteen per cent of Banbury's membership in 1867 were mechanics and apprentices, a proportion which they felt 'affords but little grounds for despondency' [10]. There is also evidence of relatively substantial support from the workers at the iron foundries in the case of the Burnham reading room [11]. Of those members of institutes in the whole region whose occupations could be identified, nearly 20 per cent were artisans.

Amongst the artisan members, 'labour aristocrats' such as Thomas Brewer and Richard Brazier of the Banbury institute epitomized the popular basis of the Victorian self-help ideal. Both were whitesmiths, probably earning 25/- a week or more in the 1860's, highly respectable men, supporting the temperance movement and seeking to emulate the middle class. Their self-education was motivated by a moral earnestness and a love of learning and they were eloquent advocates of adult education [12]. Brewer had a personal library of about 80 books, his interests encompassed both music and machinery, and he contributed articles to the institute's magazine on 'manumotive carnages' and 'alarums'. He saw the institute as the guardian of the moral welfare of the community. It 'kept men away from the temptations of the gin palace or the midnight revelry' [13].

When the Reading Institute was revived in 1840, it was soon to be re-termed a 'Literary and Scientific Institute' in recognition of the fact that membership was mainly appealing to the 'middling classes' and 'respectable tradesmen'. Nearly half of the institutes in the region were, at establishment or later, similarly titled. The committee of the Newbury L.S.I. was overwhelmingly composed of tradesmen and professionals, and initially only guinea subscribers could hold office and vote [14]. The Reading committee in 1842 was composed of the same proportion from the professional class as in 1825, but the share of artisans had fallen from a third to a tenth, whereas the representation of manufacturers, white-collar workers, and tradesmen (the latter nearly a quarter) had increased [15]. The percentage of professionals in the total membership in 1867 at Banbury was the same as in the year of establishment (1836), but whilst the proportion of artisans (and apprentices) had fallen by 9 per cent, the percentage of clerks, tradesmen and businessmen had fallen somewhat more [16]. There were no longer any weavers or machinists, but there were gentlemen 'without any occupation' and ladies. There is some evidence here for the often related, if at times over-exaggerated, embourgeoisement thesis

whereby 'middle-class Radicals wrested (the institutes) from the protagonists of the working-class ideal' [17].

It is well known that part of the Victorian middle-class ideology was of the self-made man and that, through laissez-faire and utilitarian philosophies, self-help for the artisan keen on improving himself was encouraged. Some evidence was found which supported Turner's hypothesis that in areas where it was believed that such self-improvement was possible there was an emphasis on achieved status in the functioning of the institute. The aim of the Bishop's Stortford L.I. was 'to give a status in society ... to those who had been among the lowest of our race' [18]. However, in places like Woburn, where the status and stratification system was more rigid, based on a rural economy largely unaffected by industrial change, the institute functioned to cement the social structure and reinforce the normative patterns of its members [19]. The members of the Woburn L.S.I. were told that it was pointless to become pre-occupied with self-improvement because for the vast majority of them it would not be possible to achieve a different status from the one ascribed [20].

The institutes generally were seen by the middle and upper classes as a possible form of social control for they contributed to 'knowledge (which) ... prevents men from taking narrow views of the motives which activate others and hence constitute the best possible means of national safety in periods of great commercial distress' [21]. The Earl of Hardwicke, the President of the Royston Institute, saw the value of educating the 'poorer classes' in their becoming 'loveable and attached members of society' [22]. When the London and Birmingham Railway Company provided funds for a library and reading room at the institute (founded by workers from the railway engine workshops) at Wolverton, it was not simply for benevolent reasons. They were not only hoping to help workers drawn from a wide area of the country to settle down or to entice them away from the 'Hell's Kitchen' pub; Mark Huish could also use it as a platform to urge his workers of the need to avoid 'agitators and evil counsellors' [23].

There was more behind manufacturers' support of the institutes than an aim of exploiting workers' technical powers. George Palmer, the biscuit maker, and Joseph Huntley, an ironmonger, supported both the Newbury, and along with the Hornimans, large tea merchants, the Reading L.S.I.'s. All were Quakers, supporters of the Temperance Movement, and Liberal philanthropists. Palmer had instigated a Ragged School in 1847, and this illustrates how some of the supporters of the institutes were interested in the general cause of education. Indeed, of the sixteen people who attended the initial meeting to form the Hitchin Institute in 1835, nine were trustees of the Boy's British School and two others were private schoolmasters [24]. Moreover, at the Institute, Palmer would have met such men as William Exall, a partner in an ironworks, with whom he could share his interest in science and engineering. Other relatively substantial manufacturers supporting institutes included W. H. and Samuel (3rd) Whitbread, the London brewers and great landowners in Bedfordshire, the Earleys, blanket makers at Witney, and James Howard of the Brittania agricultural machinery works at Bedford.

The lower middle-class were active in the institutes of the region. In small towns without a resident bourgeoisie or wealthy professional group, they were the social, economic and political elite. Social mobility and success were dominant values but, in real life, were not often afforded to many. Hence status aspirations were essential to allow the satisfaction of their ambitions, contributing to a formulation of their interests which coincided with the values of self-help and self-improvement of the institutes [25]. Amongst the small businessmen in this class were the straw hat manufacturers in Luton who constituted one-third of the mechanics' institute committee in 1846, no other industry in the region having so much representation. There was in fact, with this exception, a relative absence of producers of traditional products amongst the membership. To the extent that such industries could be suffering from a relative decline in some towns from the mid-nineteenth century, it was thought that the institutes might have been looked to as a way of improving occupational mobility.

Kelly argued that in 'rural areas' the proportion of manual workers would be smaller and shopworkers would form a more important element [26]. Although the evidence suggests that the membership of skilled workers should not be under-estimated, retailers constituted about one-third each of Banbury's and Hitchin's membership in 1836 and at least 15 per cent at Royston in 1855 [27]. In that tradesmen were a significant group in supporting certain institutes from the start, the embourgeoisement thesis is less applicable to this region. Their individualism precluded trade union type organizations and with no foothold on to a wider political or social tradition they looked to the institutes for company and for establishing connections which could aid their businesses. They could 'rub shoulders' with their social superiors and as Mr. Broad, a gentleman's outfitter in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, recalled, tradesmen who were well educated had 'the entrée' into the professional class [28].

In the Home Counties, clerks do not appear to have been as numerous in the membership as they were elsewhere. This partly reflects the situation where in 1871 white-collar employees formed less than 5 per cent of the total male working population of the region.

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Members of the professions, particularly the medical and legal ones, often supported the institutes in this region as in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Their lead in professional status by the mid-nineteenth century enabled them to obtain a greater degree of self-respect and to demand respect from the community. Office-holding in the institutes reflected and consolidated this status.

Where women were present in the institutes, they probably reinforced the middle-class elements. Females accounted for approximately 6 per cent of the total regional membership in 1851 [29]. In some institutes the percentage was much higher: 43 per cent at Royston in 1855, a figure which possibly included some domestic servants [30]. For some women, the institutes provided an escape from the tedium of home life and for others, such as Laura, the post office clerk at Candleford, North Oxfordshire, a source of reading matter [31]. They were not, of course, always admitted on equal terms to men and at Luton M.I., for example, they were not allowed to vote. In contrast to the situation in Temperance Societies they rarely held managerial posts.

The middle classes invariably deferred to the leadership of the nobility and landed classes for the commanding offices of the institutes. Lending their respectability, influence and values were the Earl of Caernarvon at Reading and Newbury, Lord Taunton at Slough, and the Duke of Bedford at Woburn. Even when the committee of the Hitchin M.I. was re-formed in 1839 with working men and small tradesmen in the hope that they would be more enthusiastic than their predecessors, professional people and manufacturers, William Wilshere, a member of the gentry, remained as President.

The liberal, paternal attitude towards education by the larger landowners such as Lord Dacre, a patron of the Royston Institute, can, to quite a large extent, be contrasted with that of farmers. In his evidence to the Select Committee on Public Libraries in 1849, the Rev. W. R. Fremantle, Anglican vicar of Claydon, Bucks., stated that farmers objected to the extension of anything except religious knowledge among the labourers who they did not like to see becoming wiser than themselves, and who they feared would become dissatisfied and move to the towns [32]. Farmers probably had little reason for feeling that a labourer was any more valuable to them for being literate. Their opposition to such measures as the Public Libraries Bill of 1850, it was supposed by its promoters, was due to their fear that alcohol consumption would decline. However, this seems an unlikely explanation, since brewers and publicans, who had similar vested interests, constituted approximately 8 per cent of the region's membership of the (alcohol-free) institutes with their reading matter. Farmers, in fact, were not entirely estranged from the institutes, and because of the magazines taken on agriculture they gave considerable support to the Abingdon L.S.I. Fremantle emphasized, moreover, that when landlords were resident, education benefited [33].

Contemporaries had little doubt that the farm labourer was 'the lowest type of village life ... he alone, especially in the South and West has made no perceptible advance in his education' [34]. William Lucas regarded the riots of 1846–47 in Hitchin as proof of their 'savage ignorance'. There is some evidence of their efforts for 'improvement' but their absence from the institutes, as in the case of other unskilled workers, is not surprising.

The social class composition of individual institutes was partly determined by the existence of alternative facilities. In villages such as Hadham, Herts., where the Mutual Improvement and Recreation Society was the only formal organization of its type, the social origins of the membership were relatively diverse. In a town like Reading, on the other hand, an athenaeum, literary institute, mutual improvement society and mechanics institute were all co-existing in 1841. Hence there was greater specialization of membership, subscription rates, facilities and activities, reflecting and regulating this. However, the distinctions between the various types of institute cannot always be as neatly drawn as has sometimes been suggested. The subscription rates of some mutual improvement societies and mechanics' institutes, for example, were the same and in Banbury they amalgamated in 1864. There is some truth in Harnson's statement that the former were 'the most truly indigenous of the attempts at working class adult education' [35]. This is exemplified by the composition of the one in Leighton Buzzard, which with its sickness assistance society, scheme for a coal club and the suggestion that members took a 'pledge' of support are indicative of its social origins [36]. However, an analysis of the membership of the one in King's Langley (1859) hardly revealed it to consist of 'rank and file workers'.

Members of the institutes were quite often found to be supporters of the temperance movement, albeit relatively weak in the region. Values common to both movements were self-help, respectability and prudence, whilst teetotalism attracted those who believed that rational enquiry must promote human progress. The temperance movement saw the institutes as a basis for new leisure patterns and both popularized the tea party or soirée, whilst shunning the pub. However, whilst the pub was anathema to most reformers, its ubiquity and popularity in working-class life made it an inescapable model, and the institutes tried to reproduce its social and physical warmth (the fact that a fire was kept was emphasized in the institutes' promotional activities) and were also to compete with pub re-

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creations such as draughts, chess and railway excursions [37]. In Reading, a temperance society, with its own library, reading room, and 'evening college' was established in 1832, the year after the first mechanics' institute collapsed and several of the latter's members joined it, including a former President, Benjamin Williams, a Liberal ironmonger, and two non-conformist ministers, the Revs. Hinton and Legg. Members of the temperance society at the Berkhamsted Institute included Henry Nash, a Liberal, leather seller and member of the School Board and George Cruikshank, the political cartoonist. At Charlbury, Oxfordshire, the Albrights, owners of the local temperance hotel were active in the establishment of the institute, Arthur Albright being interested in science, having developed amorphous phosphorous. Many of the active members of the Temperance Society in Banbury including its secretary, Joseph Stutterd, an ironmonger, were associated with the mechanics' institute. Both organizations contained many Liberals and philanthropists, but in contrast to the Temperance Society there were officials such as councillors and magistrates amongst the active members of the institute, including William Potts, publisher of the Banbury Guardian, Anglicans such as Henry Brayne, a surgeon, and some Conservatives, Joseph Gillett, a Quaker banker for example. Another member of both whose interests in astronomy, natural history and local antiquities were well catered for in the institutes activities, was C. D. Faulkner, a solicitor. Whilst the temperance society attracted more members, it too underwent a change in its social class composition from the 1840's, the influence of middle class activists increasing whilst radical and working class support declined [38].

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