

South Molton & District

Local History

South Molton Mechanics Institute

Mechanics' Institutes were self-improvement organisations. Originally they were primarily intended to spread knowledge and learning amongst the newly emerging artisan classes created by the Industrial Revolution. They were local, independent organisations but generally based on the same principle, usually containing a library, reading room, lecture room and sometimes a small museum. The oldest Mechanics' Institute in England was established in Holborn, London in 1823 and by 1850 there were about 700 in the UK. During the 1860s the number of Institutes gradually dwindled with those that did survive becoming almost exclusively the preserve of the middle and professional classes.

Extracted from various web sites

The Mechanics Institute at South Molton was established comparatively late on 1st January 1856. At this time South Molton had a population of approximately 4,500 with less than 1000 households. Only 150 residents had the vote. The Pannier Market had not yet been built but there was a Market House (later converted to a Post Office), plus stalls erected on Broad Street on market days. The Market House had been built on pillars and arches with rooms above which were used for meetings etc.

There were two woollen mills which were doing well due to supplying blankets to the army during the Crimean war. The mills employed between 200-300 men and women plus about 80 boys and girls. The children received a few hours schooling a day. There were also several wool staplers and wool dealers in the town. There were two tanneries and the usual mix of artisans.

Many men and women were employed in agricultural work, on the farms and dairies on West Street and Mill Street plus those on the outskirts of the town.

The larger shops were centered on Broad Street and South Street with several smaller shops and businesses scattered throughout the town. There were numerous public houses and beer houses. There were two banks, the National Provincial Bank on Broad Street and a Savings Bank in the Churchyard.

The town had been early to provide some education for the children of poor families. The Hugh Squier Free School had been set up and endowed by Hugh Squier in the late 17th century for 30 boys (it later also provided a Latin education for fee paying pupils), a Blue Coat school had been in existence since 1711 at first only for boys but girls were admitted a few years later. By the mid-1850s there were approximately 36 boys and 15 girls attending.

A National School opened in 1834 and averaged 100 pupils, both girls and boys. An Infant's school had opened in the Churchyard in 1850 for boys and girls under age of 6. There had been a school for both girls and boys at the Union Workhouse since its opening in 1837.

There was a Wesleyan Day School teaching about 70 scholars, boys and girls in 1856. There were also Sunday Schools attached to the Parish Church and three other Chapels.

There were 10 independent academies listed in Whites Directory of 1853 and by 1858 better off families could send their sons to the Devon County School at West Buckland (later to be renamed West Buckland School).

In 1854 a Reading Room was opened at Mr. Tucker's Stationary shop in Broad Street which attracted 30 members, and there was talk of the possibility of a Mechanics Institute for the town.

In 1855 the Mayor applied to the Council for a grant of £50 towards his civic hospitality, apparently this had been the custom before the Reform Act of 1834. The townspeople were angry that money should be spent on food and drink for a select few, and a public meeting was called. It was a lively meeting, which ended in a vote against the proposal. A suggestion was made that the money should be spent instead on the setting up of a Mechanics Institute for the benefit of the whole community. A committee with William Oram as secretary was appointed to look into it.

In December of the same year, another public meeting was held at the Town Hall to receive the report of the Committee. The Mayor was elected Chairman. Lord Ebrington, and Rev. Brereton of West Buckland attended. The secretary read the Report, which was to the effect that it was considered highly desirable that a society to be called "*The Southmolton Mechanics' Institute, Reading Room & Circulation Library*" be established. Rules had been drawn up and the Town Council had voted a sum of £50 to buy books. The Council had also agreed to give the rooms above the Market House rent-free. The first general meeting of the members was to be held on the 1st January 1856. Lord Ebrington, in a lengthy speech, spoke of the advantages of the institution and strongly recommended the formation of a good library and evening classes. He concluded by moving the adoption of the Report which was seconded by R. J. Crosse, Esq, and carried unanimously.

Towards the close of the business, the Rev. J. L. Brereton of West Buckland, said that from his own experiences in London and Norwich, he was so convinced of the importance of classes that, with the permission of the committee he would, come in for an hour one evening each week for five weeks, during the Christmas vacation (when his own pupils would be at their houses) and instruct a class in Geography; and he hoped that other classes would speedily be formed.

After the meeting a large number enrolled their names as members. The Institute was officially established on the 1st January 1856.

On 1st January 1857 the First Annual Report was published (an original copy can be found in the South Molton Museum)

The Rt. Hon. Lord Viscount Ebrington was elected President. Four Vice Presidents were elected, Thomas Brown, surgeon, Rev. T. H. Maitland, vicar, F. M. Hitchcock, owner of woollen mills and R. M. Riccard, solicitor.

It was reported that in the first year there were 370 members who were divided into 5 classes of subscription

Class 1 = Life Members, Donors of money, books, or apparatus – Lord Ebrington, Sir T. D. Acland, R. M. Riccard, W. G. Smyth, plus two anonymous. Subscribers of more than £1 per annum – F. M. Hitchcock and W. G. Smyth

Class 2 = Membership £1 per annum – 19 men subscribed, large shopkeepers, clergymen, etc.

Class 3 = Membership 10s per annum – 82 subscribed all male who were large shop proprietors, professional men, clergymen, merchants, clerks, schoolmasters etc.

Class 4 = Membership 4s per annum – 129 subscribed they were all male who were smaller shopkeepers, tradesmen, clerks

Class 5 = Membership 1s per annum – *entitled to library and lectures only* – 135 subscribed – 84 females and 51 males. The **females** were mainly the wives and daughters of professional men, or women running own businesses e.g. milliners, shopkeepers; **males** tended to be the younger sons of professional and tradesmen, or factory workers, bakers, victuallers/malsters; tea dealer; tailors.

A committee of 25 members was elected from all classes except the fifth. Also elected was a treasurer, auditors, a paid secretary and a paid room keeper /librarian.

Visitors could be admitted to the reading room on payment of a small fee. Non-members could attend Lectures on payment of 6d each.

One of the principal objectives was: the establishment of a good permanent library, open to all the inhabitants of the town by a nominal payment.

There were to be two social/fund raising functions a year – A fete to be held at Castle Hill and a tea and soiree at the Institute rooms.

The first year had been financially successful; the Library had 571 books, 459 of which had been purchased by the committee, the others donated. Eleven lectures had been given on a variety of subjects and had been well attended. Classes had been established and attendance had been generally good especially geography and arithmetic, the Town Council had given a grant of £50 towards purchase of books and provided desks for the writing class. The following year classes in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and grammar were planned.

A large room, well ventilated and lit had been furnished as a Reading Room, opened from 9 am to 10pm, where members could spend their leisure hours reading books, newspapers and periodicals. “Strangers” admitted for 1d fee.

The committee recommended the setting up of a museum. It was agreed to raise the subscription to the 5th class from 1s to 2s p.a. with minors under 18 to be admitted half price.

The following Lectures were arranged for the year 1856-7:

- The Greatness and Wrongs of Richard III
- Electricity and the Telegraph
- New Zealand with Illustrations
- The Anatomy and Physiology of the Heart
- British Druidism
- A Merry Christmas

- Atmospherical phenomena
- Dissolving Views
- The Foundation of Individual Character
- Life and Organisation
- Israel in Egypt

Later lectures included:

December 1858 - The rev. W. H. Karlake, of Meshaw, gave a lecture on “*Some of the principal steps that brought into existence the British Constitution*’.

March 1859 - Mr. Robert Smith of Emmett’s Grange, delivered a lecture on “*The progress of Agriculture and its relation to Manufactures and Commerce*”. According to the newspaper report the lecture room was completely filled; many of the audience having come from a considerable distance. The lecturer laid particular stress upon the aid the agriculturist had received by the advanced literature of agricultural movements, information through the newspaper press, the use of artificial manures, improved agricultural implements, the new era created by steam and railways, etc. The lecture lasted about one hour and a half.

October 1862 – a series of operatic sketches were performed which amused the audience and gave general satisfaction.

Little information has been found on the education classes, but in the Annual Report of 1863, the committee felt that working men were not taking advantage of the Institute, although it was said that it was for this class that it had been mainly designed.

The annual fete at Castle Hill was organised by the Mechanics’ Institute for almost 30 years and became a popular half-day holiday for hundreds of local people. It was usually held on a Thursday afternoon in July or August. Shops and businesses in South Molton were closed for the afternoon so that as many people as possible could join in.

The first Fete was held in the grounds of Castle Hill on a fine August afternoon in 1856. About 1000 people from as far afield as Barnstaple paid 6d each entry. There was a marquee with refreshments as well as a booth manned by Mr. George Snow of the Anchor Inn, selling more “*potent liquids and the Indian weed*”. The grounds were decorated with flags and bunting and music was provided by the South Molton band, the Witheridge brass band, and the recently formed South Molton sax-horn band. There was archery, bowling, skittles, jingling, a cricket match between South Molton and West Buckland (won by West Buckland). The day finished with dancing until dusk. The fete made over £11 for the Institute’s funds.

The North Devon Journal gave an account of the fete held ten year’s later in July 1866. Crowds from South Molton attended arriving in a variety of transport leaving the town almost deserted. 80 tradesmen and others had been requested by the Mayor to suspend business so that as many as possible could enjoy the holiday. The cutting for the Devon & Somerset railway from Barnstaple to Taunton had just reached the Castle Hill Park and Messrs. Pickering, the contractors, allowed their engine and 12 trucks, fitted up with seats to transport the large crowds from Barnstaple to Castle Hill by train for the very first time from Barnstaple Station at 1.30 and 3 o’clock. The report wrote “*So full was the first train that it did not stop at Landkey or Swimbridge to the chagrin of several would-be excursionists,*

who thought it very hard that they could not be “took’d on”. Numbers of villagers congregated on the bridges and along the embankments to see the new invader into their district. Certainly the ride was a most pleasant one. Of course being only a temporary way the course of locomotion did not run particularly smooth – indeed passengers by such a line must, of necessity, like certain medicinal draughts, be “well shaken when taken”; but one was more than compensated for having his neighbour’s elbows now and then driven with considerable force into his ribs by the enjoyment of a ride through the lovely valley.”

On arrival the visitors enjoyed refreshments, a walk around the Park and Gardens as well as joining in the many amusements on offer. Dancing commenced at 6 o’clock and ended at 10 o’clock when the National Anthem was played. A profit of £20 was made.

Of course not all the fetes enjoyed good weather, and income to boost funds from this source could not be relied upon, and some money in good years was kept as a contingency fund.

The annual tea and soirée was held at the Institute rooms on a Thursday in January starting with tea at 5 o’clock, which was organised and served by the ladies who also decorated the tables with vases of flowers. In January 1866, nearly 200 people enjoyed tea and cake – too many to sit down all at once some had to wait in another room until others had finished. The admission for the tea was 9d. After everyone had eaten, the room was cleared; a stage erected and seats put out for the evening’s entertainment, admission 9d. When the room was reopened it was soon filled to overflowing with some having to stand by the door. The entertainers were all local people – some sang glees; duets; piano solos; piano duets; piano and flute duet; comic songs; readings, etc., the performers were all encored and the readings listened to with marked attention. The evening ended with a rendering of,

God Save the Queen.

During the 1860s the Institute seemed to be reasonably successful although membership was declining but the number of books in the library continued to grow.

The 11th AGM took place on 1st January 1867. There were 267 members an increase of three members since the previous year, (370 members in 1856). There had been less subscribers to the 3rd class. The bank balance was healthy and the library contained 2,236 books, with about 7000 books issued for reading, the Town Council gave a grant of £25 towards the purchase of books. It was reported that in the Reading Rooms the full complement of newspapers and periodicals had been maintained, *“and the comfort and convenience of members promoted in every respect.”*

There was at least one dissatisfied member who wrote the following letter to the North Devon Journal published on 17th January 1867:

SOUTH MOLTON MECHANICS INSTITUTE

Sir,

The committee of this Institute in their Report of last year’s proceedings say that “the comfort and convenience of the members has been promoted in every respect”. This is not the fact, for we, the members of the outer room, are not allowed to enter it until 4 o’clock in the afternoon. During this frosty weather we would gladly spend the greater part of the day there reading and warming ourselves by the fire; but no, we must remain in the street or go to some inn instead. Why the room should be

kept empty until 4 o'clock of each day I am at a loss to guess. If the committee wish to promote the comfort and convenience of the members of the outer room why not throw it open all day to its members? I trust that this hint will have the desired effect, if it does not I shall resign my membership, and, I believe that others will do the same.

South Molton January 15th

I am sir, yours truly

A WORKING MAN

By the 20th AGM, in 1876 - membership had dropped substantially to 143 a decrease of 20 members compared to the previous year, mainly from the 4th class, there was also a decrease in numbers in the 2nd and 3rd classes. Later the same year the North Devon Journal reported that although the library was widely used, the classes for instruction of the youth of the town, and the lectures had both lost their popularity. Only a small number had attended the last lecture entitled "*Drawing and Science in their relation to Dress, Work and Furniture*". In April, in an attempt to raise funds and increase membership, a Spelling Bee was held at the New Assembly Room.

The 1880s continued to see a drop in membership and the Institute was experiencing financial difficulties. In 1882, there were only 102 members and it was thought that one of the reasons was that a Coffee Tavern had opened in the town. A Working Men's Club and Reading Room had opened in the Star Temperance Hotel, and this too was probably another cause. Chess and draughts were introduced in the hope that this would increase membership.

In 1883 membership was still low and finances were not healthy. It was agreed to admit members of the 4th class to the Reading Rooms for the whole of the day and to give them the same access to the papers as other members. The issue of books was limited to Wednesday and Saturday. Salaries and other expenses were cut, the large room was discontinued as a reading room to save on fire and gas, and two newspapers discontinued.

One of the last Castle Hill fetes to be organised by the Mechanics' Institute took place on Thursday the 14th July 1881 when the North Devon Journal reported that "*this fete for a considerable time was an event looked to by all the neighbouring towns and was very largely attended, but of late similar entertainments have been organised and have robbed the Institute of some of its prestige*".

The Institute continued to struggle on, with the last AGM being held in March 1887. The same year, the Council decided to turn the ground floor of the former Market House into a Post Office and the upper rooms into a residence for the Post Master. There was an unsuccessful attempt by the Committee to find suitable premises to house the library and reading room. In November 1888 a meeting was held to consider what was to be done with the books and other effects belonging to the Institute. It was decided to offer them to the Council with a view to a free library being formed in the town. Finally in December 1889 the 3000 or more books that had belonged to the Mechanics' Institute were used to open a free public lending library in the front room of the former Borough Police Station in East Street (present day Nos 22 - 23)

Sources:

27/12/1855 - Exeter Flying Post – 7ef

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North Devon Journal, 21st July 1881

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North Devon Journal – 26th December 1889

John Cock's history of South Molton

Filleigh Fete at Castle Hill 1856-2005, researched and compiled by Pat & Margaret Pidler

Census Returns

Trade Directories