

The Rise and Fall of a Building - SETTLE MECHANICS' HALL

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Although many people remember that George Birkbeck, the originator of the Mechanics' Institute movement, was born in Settle, the site of Settle Mechanics' Institute Hall appears to have completely gone out of people's memories. Thanks to Mr. Chris Ellis of Langcliffe we can now reveal where it was and some of its history.

Brayshaw & Robinson (p.196) tell us that the Mechanics' Institute was started in Settle in 1831 but do not give any other information apart from saying it was not very successful and neglect to say where they met. However a newspaper cutting from the Craven Herald of 1910 and an advertisement in the Settle Chronicle of 1899 (reproduced here) tells us they were formed in 1851. Did Brayshaw & Robinson get the date wrong? Or was an entirely new Institute commenced then? The newspaper article was reporting on the opening of what used to be the Mechanics' Hall as the new revamped Liberal Club premises and gives a brief resume of the Mechanics' history - "they met in the Old Court House before the Institute was built". But what was meant by the Old Courthouse? The road through to Giggleswick Station was not built until 1849, so it is doubtful that they meant the building now called the Old Courthouse in Station Road, particularly as early as 1831, though in 1851 it could be a possibility. All the buildings in this vicinity were shown as part of the New Inn at the time of the Tithe Award Schedule in 1844. Or it may refer to the Old Court House in Bishopdale Court, which became the Craven Assembly Rooms at one end, and a Warehouse at the other. Anyway, wherever they were meeting, in the early 1850s it was decided that a purpose-built Mechanics' Institute Hall was needed for Settle.

The building site which was to be used for the Institute started life as a barn on the southern outskirts of Settle belonging to the Langcliffe Hall Estate and was one of the last town buildings on the road out to Long Preston. The tithe award map shows it as No. 273 with houses either side and gardens behind it. When Mr. Pudsay Dawson senior sold off the leases of the Estate lands, an Indenture of 1806 shows that the barn lease was bought by Nancy Harger of Halsteads. The barn stayed in the lease ownership of the Harger family, with John Cowburn as sub-tenant, until 1845 when Mr. Thomas Birkbeck of Stainforth bought the barn outright for £120.

In 1851 when the idea of a Mechanics' Institute Hall for Settle was raised, Mr. Birkbeck offered to sell the barn and garden attached for £200 to convert to suitable premises. Shares were offered at £2-2-0d each to residents within a 6 mile radius of Settle and in this way £527-2s was raised. A list of shareholders

and the amount of shares they bought, show that Thomas Birkbeck bought the most shares with 25, Thomas Oates and Matthew Jackman bought 40 shares between them and Robert Hargreaves 15. The majority of members bought under 10 shares. The residue of the money, after the purchase of the barn, was used to pull down the barn and build a Public Building with a large meeting room to be called The Mechanics' Hall. A Settle Chronicle for February 1854 carried an article announcing that the Mechanics' Hall was nearing completion and that it would have a convenient lecture room which would seat nearly 300 people. At their last AGM in the Court House, the Mechanics reported that they had 88 members and their library contained 680 volumes, 50 of which had been added that year.

Duke Street, Settle looking towards the institute site.
(photo C.Ellis)

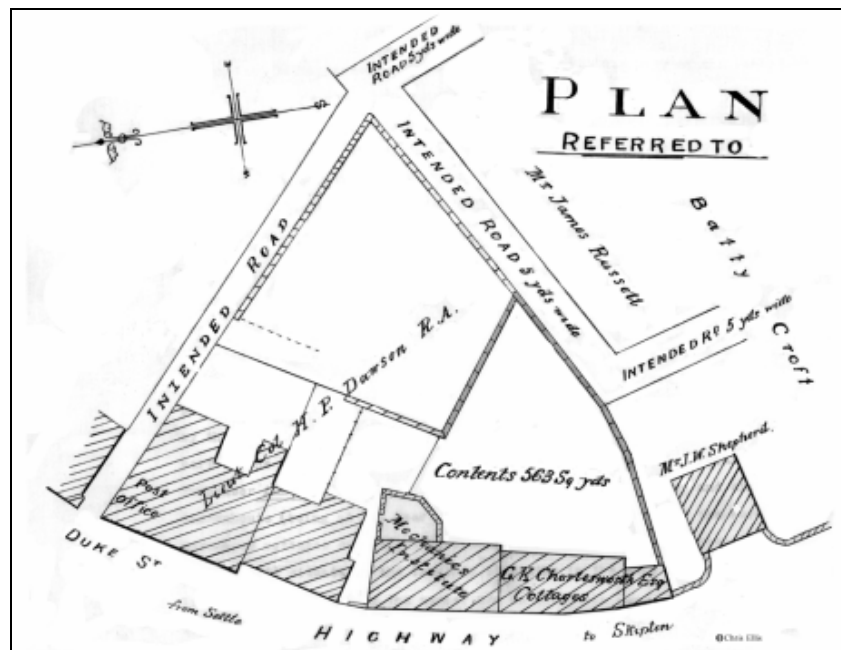


The opening ceremony was planned for 28th October 1854 by the Duke of Carlisle, but was cancelled at the last moment because his nephew died of fever in the Crimea. The Hall was eventually officially opened 12th January 1855 by the Duke, who gave a lecture on the poetry of Gray to a packed audience. A Conveyance of Deed shows that the Mechanics' Hall was up and running at that date. Shares could be transferred to others and interest from Letting Income was paid out to shareholders according to how many shares they had. A list of rules was drawn up and Five Trustees elected who were given power to run the Hall, they were: John Armistead, Draper; William Shepherd, Chemist; Joseph Harger, Joiner; John Snell, Tailor; and John Lister, Attorney's Clerk.

Adverts and snippets in Lamberts' Settle Almanacs for the period show that the hall was well used for lectures, entertainments and as a reading room. Brayshaw & Robinson (p.169) tell us that in January 1863, John Fairs, then a schoolboy at Giggleswick School, took part in a charity play performance in the hall for the benefit of distressed cotton workers. He later became famous as the actor Sir John

Hare. Other groups hired rooms in the premises, some on a regular basis, such as The Rechabites.

By 1899 the importance of The Mechanics' Hall had obviously diminished as a Conveyance of November that year shows that two Gentlemen had leased the Mechanics' Hall and the cottage beneath for a rent of £15 for 7 years.



A Board of Managers consisting of Joseph Bell, James Jackson, Jonathon Snell & James Twistleton, ran the Settle and District Technical Institute here, paying £17-10s for a further seven years. This was later taken over by Settle & District Higher Education Committee. The Mechanics' Club still used the downstairs room once a month at a rent of £2-12s per annum. The Rechabite Club were also charged £2-12s per annum and the Rechabite Juniors £1-5s for the use of the club room with gas included. The premises were insured with Yorkshire Fire and Life Insurance Co. for £400 at a premium of 6s per annum payable on Lady Day.

By 1903 all the original Trustees of the Mechanics Hall had died and there were no heirs to take over the positions.

The AGM Minutes of 25th January 1909 for the Company of Proprietors of Settle Mechanics' Hall show that Joseph Bell and T.A. Bulcock represented the Mechanics' Club, and Thomas Foster and John Hardy Junior the Rechabites, with John Taylor as an individual. Later that year a Special General Meeting was held when it was unanimously resolved - "That this Special General Meeting of the Proprietors of the Mechanics' Hall hereby orders and directs that all the building

known as the Mechanics' Hall with the appurtenances be absolutely sold and disposed of'. The price obtained was £450. By December 1909 the Mechanics' Club had wound up altogether, and a requisition of Title shows that Thomas Harger took possession (the plan of 1909 shows that new roads and housing were being planned). In 1910 the premises were bought by William Clough of Steeton, a Liberal M.P. for £600. He completely renovated the building and leased it to the local Liberal Club as their headquarters.

FRIENDLY UNITED ORDER OF MECHANICS.

(Pride of Craven Lodge, No. 3156.)

Instituted March 1st, 1851. Registered November 10th. 1868.

Registered Place of Meeting—Mechanics' Hall, Settle.

Lodge President—Thomas A. Bulcock. Vice-President—George Gill.

Treasurer—John Redmayne. Senior Deacon—Arthur Holmes.

Junior Deacon—Francis Holmes. Tyler David Jackson.

Trustees—Robert W. Garner, William Bowskill, and Samuel Hodgson.

Board of Arbitrators—Messrs. T. Harger, J. W. Shepherd, John Lord, and G. Clark.

Auditors—Henry Brennand and Matthias Nowell.

Secretary—Joseph Dell, Chapel Hill, Settle.

Medical Officer—James W. Edgar, M.D.

The Lodge is open every fourth Saturday evening, at 7 o'clock.

Lodge Nights for 1898 are as follows:—Jan. 7, Feb. 4, March 4, April 1, April 29, May 27, June 24, July 22, August 19, Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Nov. 11, Dec. 9.

The total number of members in the Society, Jan. 1st, 1898, was 232.

Total funds, £1158 11s. 0d.

Ex. Lambert's Settle Almanac & General Advertiser Jan 1899 page 259

The building was sold to West Riding County Council in 1925. At that time the sale deed notes that - "all that plot of land (formerly in two pieces) situated in Duke Street in the Parish of Settle ...and also the buildings erected thereon lately used as a Liberal Club." It also quotes this description from the previous sale - "All that messuage or dwellinghouse with the club room adjoining thereto and the Hall over the same site on the east side of Duke Street in Settle aforesaid together with the yard and outoffices in the rear thereof and which premises were known by the name of The Mechanics' Hall. And together with a right of footroad and barrow way at all times over and along the roadway or passage at the north side of

the said hereditaments and premises to and from the said yard and also the right to empty and cleanse the ashpit of the said hereditaments and premises and remove ashes and refuse therefrom through the door of the said ashpit into the garden situate on the north side of the said hereditaments and then belonging to Lt. Col. Henry Philip Dawson.”

In 1931 The Settle Naturalist and Antiquarian Society leased the large upstairs room with cloakroom and lavatory for £1-15 per annum. Later, Settle Museum took over the building until 1960.



The building was sold in 1961 to Emily Forster for £525. The executors of this lady's will then sold in May 1973 to Chris and Nancy Ellis who wanted to build new car showrooms and garage. At this point the two cottages and the Mechanics' Hall were pulled down. Only part of the gable wall of the old Mechanics' Hall is left standing, with the ginnel and houses adjoining on the town side.

Acknowledgements:

Mr. Chris Ellis for allowing us to copy deeds, plans & photos relating to the building;

Family of the late Tom Dugdale for allowing us to copy materials from his archive.

Brayshaw, T. & Robinson, R.M. A History of The Ancient Parish of Giggleswick. Publ. Halton & Co. Ltd. London (1932).

Hudson.R. NCHT Journal 2005.pp 24-26.

If anyone has further information or photographs relating to the Mechanics' Hall, the North Craven Historical Research Group would very much like to add such items to the public access computer archive. Members of the public are encouraged to come and look up information on the public access computer archive held in Procter House, Kirkgate – it is best to phone first though on 01729 825773 to ensure we are not out researching 'in the field'.

Elected members of the NCHRG Committee are Chairman – John Fox; Secretary – Rita Hudson; Treasurer – David Johnson; Outreach & Education – Prof. Kit Dodson; Project Manager & Archivist – Phil Hudson. Anyone interested in helping with ongoing historical projects or requiring assistance with their own research should get in touch with Phil on the above telephone number.