



THE BIRKBECK INSTITUTE:

THE STORY OF
LONDON'S EVENING UNIVERSITY.

By FRED. A. MCKENZIE.



THE network of lanes lying between Fleet Street and Holborn is one of the most interesting districts in London. It was long the home of the lawyers, but to-day the printer is gradually ousting them from their place. But even the roar of a thousand giant presses cannot give the spot an air of modernity. Every by-way has a history, and the memories of many generations cling around each tortuous lane. Elizabethan and Stuart buildings surprise the explorer in most unexpected quarters, and now and again one even comes across private houses erected by the early Tudors. Modern buildings, like the Rolls and Record offices, are built so substantially and in such style that, notwithstanding their newly-pointed stone, one would fain believe them the old castles of Norman freebooting barons.

It is in the centre of this neighbourhood, in Bream's Buildings, just off Chancery Lane, and almost under the shadow of the

Record Office, that the Birkbeck Institute has its home. At first there seems something incongruous about the site, for there is little that is antiquarian about the Birkbeck. With its 3,000 busy students it rather typifies the progressive spirit of to-day. Yet to men of coming centuries the Institute will, perhaps, possess a greater historic interest than almost anything around it, for it is the birthplace of a movement that has as materially affected the lives of the mass of the English people as did either the introduction of steam or the growth of the factory. It was here that the movement for the education of the people took its real rise, and the modern spread of technical education was foreshadowed.

Seventy-five years ago the lot of the British working man was anything but happy. His wages were low, his hours of labour limited only by his personal endurance, and the cost of the barest necessities of life was exceedingly high. Sanitary regulations were almost unknown, and the

horrible slums in which even skilled artisans had then to herd were often past all power of pen to describe. The public libraries,



DR. GEORGE BIRKBECK.

(From the painting by Samuel Lane.)

free art galleries, and the popularisation of knowledge, now commonplaces of our life, were then almost undreamt of. The daily paper cost sevenpence, and monthly magazines were the luxury of the "better classes."

What was the use of

public libraries or popular prints when the mass of the people could barely spell their letters?

Such was the condition of affairs when the forerunner of the Birkbeck Institute came into being. It needed a courageous man to formulate any scheme for the improvement and education of the working classes, but, happily for them, there was a man who had sufficient faith to initiate what has proved such a splendid success and such an admirable example.

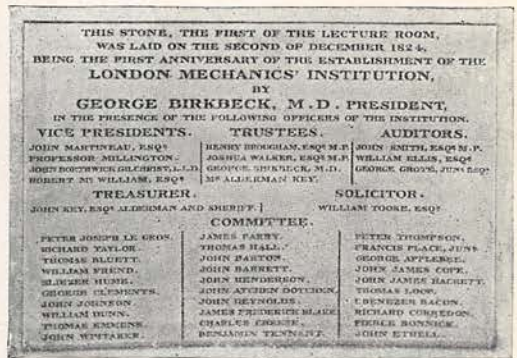
This, then, was the period when Dr. Birkbeck, a philanthropic Glasgow physician, began his campaign for the instruction of working men. He started classes in Glasgow, which were so successful that, in 1823, after much consideration, he opened a Mechanics' Institution in London, near the site of the spacious building now occupied by the Institute.

The scheme was altogether new, for up to then there had been no provision for adult evening education in London. Like all new departures, it created much comment. A number of Liberal politicians, including Sir Francis Burdett, Lord Denman, and others, rallied to Dr. Birkbeck's support. Francis Place, the famous "Radical tailor of Charing Cross," was unwearied in his defence; Lord Brougham sent a cheque for £20; and several enlightened nobles, headed by the Duke of Sussex, became patrons and supporters. Byron gave his influence in its favour, because, as he declared, the most

useful and numerous body of people in the kingdom would be enabled to judge of things for themselves, and, consequently, the ancient aristocracy of England would be secure for ages to come. The accompanying illustration of the foundation stone of the old Institution shows many of the leading names of the time in politics, literature, and science.

But in certain circles Dr. Birkbeck's scheme was received with dismay. Theodore Hook, in his vitriolic Sunday sheet, *John Bull*, could not find words bitter enough for the "squalid hypocrisy" of the plan. One ponderous magazine gravely declared that "a scheme more completely adapted for the destruction of this Empire could not have been invented by the author of evil himself." It was proclaimed that to teach the mechanic would unfit him for his work, make him a rebel and a revolutionist, overthrow the Throne, and wreck the Church.

The Institution proved an immediate and striking success. The founder defined his aim as being to give "instruction to the students in the arts they practice and in the various branches of science and useful knowledge"; and numbers flocked to hear the lectures. All the sneers at "Dr. Brickbat and his greasy mechanics" only served to advertise the work, and in a few years similar institutions were started in scores of country towns. They did a good work for many years, and then a decline set in. Excellent as they were at the beginning, many refused to adapt themselves to the



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bunnett.

THE ORIGINAL FOUNDATION-STONE OF THE BIRKBECK INSTITUTE.

new conditions created by the greater spread of education. Their lectures were often dull, their classes ill attended, and their hold on the working men diminished. Institution after institution that had done years of good



From a photo by]

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MR. G. ARMITAGE-SMITH.
(Principal of the Birkbeck Institute.)

work finally seemed attacked by a kind of dry rot, and was obliged to close its doors.

The original Mechanics' Institution suffered for a time in the general decline, and about 1866 it reached the lowest point in its history. Then Mr. George M. Norris, who had formerly served as a voluntary teacher, undertook the management and direction, and the scope of the place was materially altered. The name was changed to that now used, "The Birkbeck Institute," and from being a centre for mechanics the Institute became the educational resort of young people of a higher social standing.

The former prosperity was soon more than regained. The number of classes was increased, the total of pupils became larger and larger, and in a few years the old home was found altogether inadequate. Lord North-

brook (who took great interest in the work of the Institution and became its third President, succeeding the son of the founder) suggested the building of new premises and gave the first subscription towards it. In 1883 the Duke of Albany laid the foundation stone of the present building, which was opened two years later by the Prince and Princess of Wales. Mr. Norris retained the management and direction for thirty years, and became first Principal of the transformed Institute, working with remarkable energy and ability; but in 1896 he found the constantly growing work too great a tax on his time, and, amidst general regret, he retired. He was succeeded by Mr. G. Armitage-Smith, M.A., the well-known University Extension lecturer, who for some time previously had lectured on Mental Science at the Institute and also acted as Honorary Secretary to the Education Committee.

Mr. Armitage-Smith is a shrewd and practical North Countryman in the prime of life and possessing an abundant stock of nervous energy. He had done much to develop the Institute, particularly in its University courses, and has established day classes for the London Degrees in Arts and Science. He has a peculiar faculty of winning the confidence of young people, and he has introduced the plan of cultivating personal intercourse with as many as possible



From a photo by]

THE BIOLOGICAL LABORATORY.

[W. H. Dunnett.

of the students. He is always accessible to every member of the Institution, ready to advise courses of study, give counsel in difficulty. In his absence members can consult Mr. H. Wells Eames (Secretary to the Executive), or Mr. W. H. Congreve. Happy the Birkbeck students who have such good mentors at hand.

The Birkbeck prides itself on being the pioneer of mixed education in England. At an early stage of its career it was resolved that the Institute rooms and classes should be open to men and women alike. At the

come here, usually after a hard day's work in the office, school, or shop, for a definite purpose. They have some specific aim in view, certain subjects to study—the women as eager and industrious as the men. With the more liberal views which now prevail, education is as important to them as to men for their duties of life or for success in their careers. The hard working tone of the Institute is not favourable to frivolity, and there is little opportunity for it in an Institution so entirely educational and with no recreative elements."



From a photo by]

THE PHYSICS LABORATORY.

[W. H. Bunnett.

time the idea of mixed education was unpopular, and its advocacy created much unfavourable comment. People declared that all manner of undesirable consequences would ensue, and the governing body was solemnly warned of the downfall it was inviting. But no harm whatever followed the innovation at the Birkbeck, and the practice has been continued to this day. I inquired of Mr. Armitage-Smith if he found that the free intermingling of young people of both sexes in the classes was desirable. He thought that it was beneficial to both, and had a refining influence. "The students

Professor Tyndall once termed the Birkbeck "London's evening university." The name was an appropriate one, and aptly shows the line between this and the many polytechnics and great evening educational institutions that have sprung up within the past few years. The Birkbeck is not so strong on the social side as are many far smaller places. It has a good reading-room and library, an excellent winter series of popular lectures, and a modest refreshment department; but it does not attempt to provide the numerous clubs and varied means of recreation found in such a centre as the

Regent Street Polytechnic. The Birkbeck prefers to concentrate its strength on education, apart from purely technical teaching; and here it goes higher and further than others. It devotes itself to giving a really efficient secondary education. Teachers in day schools, civil servants, commercial clerks, business men, students for the learned professions, and others seeking to take a London University degree, find here the kind of assistance they require. In this its success is best proved by the actual results of its work. In the examinations held during the session of 1896-7 eighty students passed University of London examinations, of whom one took the London "M.A." in Mental Science, thirty-four passed the London Intermediate examination in Medicine, one gained a Royal Academy Scholarship for Painting, and numerous students obtained certificates from the Science and Art Department, Society of Arts, Bankers' Institute, and other bodies. Several gained County Council exhibitions, or passed the Cambridge Higher Locals.

The Art School requires a special word to itself. When Mr. A. W. Mason, its present head, first took charge, it had no better accommodation than a room where gas had to be burned all day for light, and where, naturally, pupils were few. To-day it has big studios at the top of the building, with

excellent north light, and is attended by a very large number of students. The art classes are held during the daytime as well as in



"THE GLEANER."

(By Annie Taverner, a student at the Birkbeck Life Class.)

the evening, and, though elementary drawing is taught, the chief work of the school is in the higher branches of designing, life studies, black-and-white work for the Press, and modelling in clay. Every year now the work of several of the old pupils is seen on the walls of the Royal Academy, and

Birkbeck trained illustrators are to-day doing good work on several leading London magazines. Art students have already learnt that it is possible to get the major part of their training even better in London than in Paris, and among London schools the Birkbeck *Atelier Mason* deservedly holds a high place. The illustration, "The Gleaner," a good specimen of Birkbeck work, reproduces a painting in oils done by Miss Annie Taverner in the Life Class, under the instruction of Mr. Childs Pocock.

If one were to tell of all the departments deserving special mention, this article would be



From a photo by]

PAINTING FROM A MODEL IN THE LIFE ROOM.

[W. H. Bunnett.

little more than a catalogue. But the chemical and biological departments cannot be passed over. They are splendidly



From a photo by [Alfred Ellis.]

MISS OLGA NETHERSOLE.

(A former student at the Birkbeck Institute.)

psychology taken by the Principal. The attendance at these is exceedingly high, and includes people of all ages. Men well over fifty sit side by side with young men and women in their teens, mastering the elements of Mental Science and plunging into the depths of philosophy—a sure sign that even the prosaic life of London cannot crush the contemplative and speculative side out of human nature.

Among the old students of the Institute are many who have since won fame in the most varied callings. Mr. Shorter, the editor of the *Illustrated London News*, studied here for some time; the editor of the *Academy* was a member; and Mr. Passmore Edwards has publicly admitted his indebtedness to the Birkbeck for the lessons he learnt there

equipped with much costly apparatus, and are largely used by scientific students and medical students from the hospitals. Among the most popular features in the Institute, strange as it may at first appear, are the logic and

when, as a poor lad fresh from Cornwall, he first came to London. Mr. Sidney Webb, the distinguished economist and Fabian, studied long here.

Mr. W. Pett Ridge, whose stories are so popular and entertaining, has been for sixteen years a member, and is still an active worker, being one of the Council and on the Executive Committee.

Among dramatists the Birkbeck can claim Mr. Pinero and Mr. Arthur Shirley; and Miss Olga Nethersole was once a student of the elocution class. It is sometimes said that Sir Henry Irving was a student here. This is a mistake, for Sir Henry Irving assures me that, though always

taking an interest in the Institute, he never belonged to it or studied in its classes. Among other distinguished students may be mentioned Mr. Sydney Gilchrist Thomas, the inventor of the Basic Bessemer process of steel manufacture, the late Professor Tomlinson, Dr. Gregory, the traveller and explorer, Mr. Alexander Watson, the talented elocutionist, and Mr. J. Edward Pearce, the well known provincial actor.

Mr. Francis Ravenscroft, the Number One member of the Institute, is best known to the world as founder of another "Birkbeck"—the Bank—which, though



From a photo by [C. E. Fry.]
MR. SIDNEY WEBB.



From a photo by [Alfred Ellis.]

MR. A. W. PINERO.

(Who studied for a time at the Birkbeck Institute.)

to-day quite separate from the Institute, yet sprang out of it. When a young man, Mr. Francis Ravenscroft was an articled pupil to a solicitor. He joined the London Mechanics' Institution (as it was still then called) in 1847 for the purpose of studying shorthand, and seven months after his admission—when only eighteen years old—he was proposed as a member of the Committee. There was a hot contest for the vacant offices, but Mr. Ravenscroft came out head of the poll. He has been on the Committee—or the Council, as it is now called—ever since, for over half a century in unbroken succession. A Chancery suit interested him in the work of building societies, and he resolved to start a building society on improved lines. The Society was begun in the offices of the Institute, and for some time its main patrons were Institute men. Gradually it grew to a great concern, and the Birkbeck Bank grew along with it; but few people realised its size or its stability until there occurred the now historic “rush” of depositors in September, 1892, caused by the failure of the Liberator Society. The way in which the Bank met

and overcame the rush won it such a reputation and gained a degree of public confidence as any might envy.

Although the Birkbeck Institute does not undertake technical teaching, it is associated

with one of the newest technological institutes. When the Charity Commissioners revised the City Charities in 1891, the Birkbeck asked and obtained a participation in the funds, the Commissioners paying off a debt that still rested on the new building, and making a grant of £1,000 a year. At the same time they federated it with the City of London College, another of the older educational institutions of the Metropolis, and with the then unbuilt Northampton Institute in Clerkenwell, making the whole the City Polytechnic, each of the three working independently, but with a cohesion of aims and plans. The Northampton Insti-

tute has recently been opened, and now affords the Birkbeck students facilities for gaining technical familiarity with any desired trade, besides gymnasia and swimming baths for the joint use of the three Institutions.



From a drawing by]

[G. B. Black.

MR. FRANCIS RAVENSCROFT.

In a subsequent Number there will be an exhaustive article, specially illustrated, dealing with the Polytechnic, Regent Street, W.