

**THIS  
IS  
OUR  
HERITAGE**

*An account of the central role  
played by the  
NEW SWINDON  
MECHANICS' INSTITUTION  
in the Cultural, Educational and Social Life  
of the town and district for over  
One Hundred Years*

THE UNABRIDGED TEXT OF

# **AN ADDRESS**

**On the illustrious History of  
The Mechanics' Institution  
at Swindon, 1843-1960**

GIVEN TO A MEETING OF  
MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS OF  
**THE NEW MECHANICS' INSTITUTION  
PRESERVATION TRUST LIMITED**

at

THE COLEVIEW COMMUNITY CENTRE, STRATTON ST. MARGARET

on

**WEDNESDAY, 11th JULY 1996**

by

**TREVOR COCKBILL**

a Founder Member of the Trust;  
Former Member of the Mechanics' Institution  
and  
author of several works on  
the History of Swindon and District

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## FOREWORD

This little production is the first of what we hope will be a series of publications of particular appeal to members and supporters of the New Mechanics' Institution Preservation Trust Limited, and also to others interested in the history and heritage of Swindon and district.

The text of "*This is our Heritage*" was not originally prepared with publication in mind, but as the draft for an address given to Trust supporters by one of our founder members at a meeting held on 11th July 1996. In preparing it for publication we have decided to maintain the original wording with only the addition of a number of "headings" and the footnote on page 17 which corrects a small but important error which featured in the talk. An Index of the people mentioned in the text has also been added.

Although the role of the Mechanics' Institution is mentioned in most of the "standard" works on the history of Swindon, there has never been a published *and* comprehensive account of the contribution which it made to the social, cultural and educational life of the town and district; in his 1996 address the speaker attempted, as far as was possible in the two hours at his disposal, to offer his audience such a general survey.

We feel confident that a number of those who were present at the meeting will be glad to have this verbatim record of the proceedings and there will be many others who will find this booklet of considerable interest. As we prepare for what we hope will be a great drive towards our ultimate goal, that of securing and preserving the Emlyn Square building for the people of Swindon so that it can, during the next century, fulfill a similar role to its illustrious past, there is much material, within these pages, for us all to find inspiration.

**ROY COZENS,**

Trustee, New Mechanics' Institution Preservation Trust Limited

*The Chair having been taken at 7.30p.m. by Mrs. Martha Parry . . .*

## **MADAM CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN;**

One thing I must make clear at the outset: the observations which I intend to make this evening are entirely my own, they are not and should not be taken to be the opinions, either in part or in whole, of the **New Mechanics' Institution Preservation Trust Limited**. Any criticisms of individuals, or private or public bodies, that may be drawn from the contents of this address are *entirely my own*. Some of my friends who are members of the Trust have been kind enough to offer me the privilege of this platform in order to expound my own belief, which is that the Institution which began in 1843 with the collection of few books to form a small circulating library became the most valuable and most precious part of the heritage to which we, living in this area, can lay claim today. It follows from that, as I shall attempt to demonstrate this evening, that any talk of the *heritage of Swindon and its vicinity*, any attempt to build upon it, or profit from it, or to explain it, will be a nonsense *unless* the Mechanics' Institution is afforded its central and proper role.

So the burden of my story this evening is my own, and I alone am responsible for claims which I make, or for any offence which is incurred. That, I trust, hopefully, is a clear and unmistakable "official health-warning" on the packet of what is to follow.

In passing, you will notice that I have used the words *Swindon and its vicinity*, and have done so very deliberately. Although the original title of the organisation was **The New Swindon Mechanics' Institution**, in what was in effect its earliest recorded manifesto of intent, when proposals were drawn up to build a home, in 1853, for the organisation which, until then, had no premises of its own, the words *for the inhabitants of New Swindon and its vicinity* were very carefully and deliberately used. So, although this meeting takes place in the parish of Stratton St. Margaret, and there are, I know, a number of local parishioners here, the heritage of which I am speaking belongs not only to those who live in what was originally called *New Swindon*, it belongs also to the whole town *and* its vicinity. And, right from the outset, the membership of the Institution included some who lived up the hill in the old town, some who lived here in Stratton St. Margaret, others who dwelt in Wroughton, Rodbourne Cheney, Wanborough, South Marston and all the parishes around.

## **UNIQUE AMONGST MECHANICS' INSTITUTIONS**

So now I can explain the burden of my story: it is that **our** Mechanics' Institution was unique, even amongst Mechanics' Institutions; that its influence on the social, educational and cultural life of this area was also unique, and that, as I hope to show, it was a unique organisation in so far as it made an exceptional contribution to the development of a mode of transport that has, up until now at least, proved invaluable to our civilization; and also that a Roll of Honour of the Institution's members, over a period of more than one hundred years, would contain, if such a Roll could ever be compiled, a galaxy of illustrious names the like of which **no other local, voluntary, organisation** in the United Kingdom or elsewhere could hope to rival.

No real appreciation of the uniqueness of our Mechanics' Institution is possible without some little understanding of the "movement" for the foundation of such bodies which took place, mainly in England, but also in Scotland and Wales, during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. I use the word "movement" with no little trepidation, for although it has been used by a number of learned

historians of our time and earlier, the Institutes were really more of "a fashion" than a movement: they were, virtually without exception, local, independent creations, often imitated in one place by the example of another, but never centrally controlled, directed or encouraged by a national council or anything of that sort. That much was a weakness, but an understandable weakness given the social conditions in which they flourished for some five and twenty years or so, a weakness which was understood and remedied by the much later **Club and Institute Uxoon**, which fostered the proliferation of licensed Working Men's Clubs from the mid-Eighteen-Eighties onwards, of which we have still, today, so many surviving and still nourishing bodies in this town and area.

#### **THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTE PHENOMENON, 1824 - 1850**

So first, let us begin with a few words about Mechanics' Institutes in general. They were, in their hey-day, local organisations, making use of the different industrial and social conditions in the areas in which they sprang up, and using, as best they could, the time and talents of those who sponsored and joined them.

There has, not surprisingly, been some controversy over the origins of Mechanics' Institutes, with claims being made on behalf of both Edinburgh and Glasgow as the venue of the first Institute, with dates being suggested in 1822, 1823 and 1824. Certainly the first Institute founded in England as such was at London, in 1824, with George Birkbeck, a native of Settle, in Yorkshire, as its founder. However, there had been forerunners, at Glasgow, in 1799, when the same George Birkbeck, then professor of Natural History at Anderson's College, delivered his first free lectures to the working-classes of that city. Something of the same sort, established probably a few years before Professor Birkbeck's Glasgow experiment, was the **Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-on-Tyne**, although the earliest record of that body I have found is an account of a meeting held by the Society on 11th February, 1800.

There were a number of other voluntary associations in existence at the beginning of the previous century which - although they were not Mechanics' Institutions - were, I believe, a form of model or partial inspiration for the many Mechanics' Institutions which developed from 1824 onwards. Most of these other bodies were primarily devoted to gatherings of literary-minded gentlemen, perhaps the most famous of them being the Surrey Institution which met in Blackfriars Road, London. Amongst those who were interested in the proceedings of the Surrey Institution were; the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge; William Hazlitt, the eminent essayist and literary philosopher, delivered a number of lectures there and the poet John Keats made special efforts to hear him speak. In 1811 Mr. Hazlitt delivered a course of interesting lectures at the Russell Institution in central London; lectures which in many ways set a pattern which, by coincidence or design, was followed by several series of others in New Swindon many years afterwards. A rather informal association, the faithful adherents of which had interests in both scientific and literary matters, was centred upon the Salopian Coffee House at Charing Cross, where the great road, canal and harbour engineer Thomas Telford held court whenever he was in London. His intimates included the poet laureate Robert Southey and the young poet Thomas Campbell. It was from that circle that the professional body known as the Institute of Civil Engineers, of which Mr. Telford was the first president, was founded in 1832.

The many Mechanics' Institutes which were founded from 1824 onwards owed something to those generally informal, usually literary but occasionally scientific associations; but they broke new ground. Whereas such bodies as the Surrey and Russell Institutes - and Mr. Telford's coffee house

masters - were restricted by circumstances if not intention to gentlemen of some means, the Mechanics' Institutes were *primarily* intended to spread rational knowledge and an appetite for education amongst the newly emerging artisan classes which the industrial revolution was creating. The Mechanics' Institutes encouraged, for the first time, the large scale involvement of *ordinary* people in a series of collective operations of self-help, through collective involvement, introducing many of them to methods of organisation which led to an avalanche of successful societies, associations, clubs, institutions, call them what you like, which affected progress in all walks and spheres of life.

At this point I would like to introduce the first of my major points, which I will call **Proposition No. 1**: which is that when we are looking at the early Mechanics' Institutes which sprang up throughout the country during the 26 years from 1824 onwards we are looking at the beginnings of something very new in British social life. I believe it is something that is most significant in the story of these islands, one of the most important developments since the Norman Conquest, of wider significance than such vaunted historical events as Magna Carta.

For my own amusement, some time ago, I began to compile a list of voluntary associations of people, for any purpose, including where possible the year in which those associations were formed. I compiled this list by trawling through a few score reference books I have collected; a pile of old historical magazines and some notebooks full of my own scribbles over the past fifty years. That list is random, it is far from complete, as a sample it would probably satisfy few statisticians, but it shows a pattern, and I am sure that pattern shows a true outline of what actually happened. My list shows a few organisations that existed in Tudor times, during the next two centuries the numbers increased steadily but the associations were almost exclusively connected with such professions as medicine, or with the arts, or in a few cases with leisure pursuits. Throughout the 18th century the numbers increased steadily, but most were national societies, or connected with the great Universities. I found very few *local* associations that were formed before 1790. From say 1790 to 1850 there was a significant increase in local bodies; however, many of the societies, associations, clubs, whatever, formed in those years did not endure for very long. Most were failures, which folded within a year or so. From 1850 onwards, however, the story is very different; societies and associations for many different purposes, both local and national, began to multiply. Now that, as I will try to illustrate in a moment, has more than a little to do with the 700 or so Mechanics' Institutes which were flourishing in that year, 1850.

Mechanics' Institutes on the pattern of the London model were soon established in Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds, and others followed in virtually every other large town or city in the country. A pattern of activities soon became clear. Usually libraries were established, and as soon as premises could be acquired or built for the Institutes then Reading Rooms, supplied with newspapers and journals, were opened. As I have already mentioned, evening classes in literacy and arithmetic were soon followed by others in machine drawing and the theory and practice of mechanics and workshop technology, although such classes were usually confined to the Institutes operating in the neighbourhood of large engineering establishments.

Some of those Mechanics' Institutes were heavily sponsored by industrial magnates, the one at Clay Cross, founded by Mr. George Stephenson, being a notable example. Such Institutes served an entirely different purpose. Help for purpose-built premises and generous financial support for the purchase of books and for educational classes was given by progressive industrialists who recognised

that the mechanic with a knowledge of the theory of mechanics is more valuable to his employer than the mechanic who has no such knowledge, and so amongst the largest Institutes technical education classes were greatly encouraged by such industrialists as Robert Stephenson, James Nasmyth and Joseph Whitworth.

A common feature of virtually all those early, and the later and smaller Institutes which rapidly appeared in small market towns with no tradition of mechanical engineering whatsoever, was the "popular lecture". At that time, few places except the largest centres had theatres or concert halls, although many taverns had opened small music hall annexes they were not, *quite*, the place where the "respectable" tradesman or workman would care to take his wife and daughters. So the popular lectures, orchestral and choral concerts and literary readings in the Institute halls soon became the events which the decent and aspiring town-dwellers attended for their entertainment. As respectable as Divine Service at the established church, or the devotional exercises at dissenting chapels, the lectures and other entertainments at the local Mechanics' Institute became the place where the respectable and the socially aspiring could be, *and needed to be*, seen.

There was, of course, another, powerful, impetus to the enthusiasm for those "popular lectures". Educated gentlemen in the universities and other seats of learning soon found that Mechanics' Institutions, anxious to vie with each other in attracting eminent speakers, however obscure the subject might be, were prepared to pay travelling expenses and good fees for their services. Less concerned with fees but equally anxious to lecture at such venues were the many pseudo-scientific cranks at large in the country at that time, and also there were many other polemicists or enthusiasts with bees in their bonnets who were willing and anxious to fill gaps in the Institute programmes.

As it happened, the so-called popular lectures, which in time became the principal activity of many Mechanics' Institutes, were to prove the undoing of most of them. As hard-pressed secretaries strove to elevate the standards, so the lectures and the lecturers became more obscure and less relevant to the lives of the majority of the Institute members, who soon became bored with the adventures of missionaries returning from the Sahara or the Antipodes, with learned dissertations by clerics on the role of Archbishop Laud in the events that led to the English Civil War, or tedious theories on such phenomena as Stonehenge by earnest researchers who had spent their lives failing to discover any new or interesting fact about the subject of their lectures. The numbers of artisans attending the lectures fell away, and the lecturers found themselves speaking to a few rows of very respectable people of the sort who can always see the Emperor's non-existent clothes, while loafers who had nothing better to do than attend the lectures fell asleep on, and sometimes off, wooden benches at the back of the halls.

And so, by 1850, the Mechanics' Institute *fashion*, nationwide, reached its zenith, when there were around 700 such bodies in existence. Thereafter, rapidly thereafter, the numbers of Institutes dwindled. Many of them became local libraries. The premises of others became Town Halls or were taken over by schools. On the whole, the few that survived became almost exclusively the preserve of the so-called middle and professional classes, A few others abandoned all pretence to cultural and educational pursuits, they installed licensed bars, prohibited ladies, and joined the Club and Institute Union. By the turn of the century there were only about a dozen Mechanics' Institutes, recognisable as such, in existence.

For many years there were two popular, fallacious to the point of being misleading, versions of the



real purpose behind the original Mechanics' Institute "fashion". On the one hand, these organisations, which never confined their membership to mechanics or other artisans, or manual workers, although initially they had a strong appeal to craftsmen and the better educated or more ambitious individuals amongst the working classes, these mushrooming bodies, were regarded by the more reactionary elements amongst society, including many of those privileged by birth to enjoy wealth and influence, as essentially *subversive*. Education, such people held, should be the prerogative of the few who were better suited to use it, if only for the purpose of maintaining the *status quo* and the defence of the demi-god known as Property. Any attempt to educate and inform the lower orders, such people held, disrupted the labour market, made the humble dissatisfied with their lot and was part of a general plot to spread revolutionary fervour, on the pattern of the turmoil that had such terrible consequences in France at the end of the Eighteenth Century, throughout loyal Hanoverian England.

On the other hand, there were those on the opposite wing of the political argument who believed that Mechanics' Institutes were a determined and successful plan by the owners of factories, mines and mills to divert the attention of working people away from revolutionary or reformist movements and to occupy their minds with irrelevant trivia. People who would otherwise have been on the streets, shouting and demonstrating for political reform, or hard at work in the factories and shipyards demanding higher wages, shorter hours and organising strikes, were instead kept busy in the Institutes suffering renderings of the latest songs by Mr. Mendelssohn or enduring lectures on the positive benefits to be obtained from a Turkish bath.

Now, then. Sometimes it is possible to say, when confronted with arguments between two extremes, that the truth lies somewhere in the middle but in the case of the Mechanics' Institutes which proliferated and flourished between 1825 and 1850 there is an element of truth in both those contentions. The wider spread of knowledge, the encouragement of reading, both of books and newspapers, certainly did encourage, to some considerable extent, an awareness amongst many that there was a desperate need for social and political reform in late Hanoverian England. On the other hand, the wider spread of knowledge convinced others that the conditions necessary for a popular revolution on the lines of the French model did not exist at that time in England, and that any attempt to launch such a revolt was both futile and dangerous. It may well be that a few, who might otherwise have been persuaded to join revolutionary activities, were diverted from such paths by learning to read and were sufficiently amused by the writings of such authors as Miss Jane Austen to forget their hunger or their long hours of toil or their wretched living conditions; but they were only a few.

What the main body of Institutes did was to encourage a thirst for knowledge across the spectrum of society, not only amongst the barely literate but also amongst the more privileged.

But the Mechanics' institute "movement" made another contribution to the development of social life in Britain, one which has been almost completely overlooked by social historians but a contribution which, I believe, was of profound significance.

## **DEMOCRACY FOR THE FEW**

In 1825, when the first real Mechanics' Institutes were founded, Britain could lay no claim to popular democracy. In the rural shires power lay principally with the landed gentry and their nominees who served as county magistrates; when those affluent gentlemen assembled in each shire for the Quarter Sessions they were the *de facto* form of local government in the absence of local councils. The

overwhelming majority of the people were not allowed to vote at Parliamentary elections, only those holding land or property of a certain value enjoyed the privilege. The scales were further weighted in favour of the rustic aristocracy and landowners by the uneven distribution of Parliamentary seats. For example, before the Reform Bill of 1832 became law, Wiltshire, with its sparse population, had a total of 34 Members of Parliament, most of them representing a few hundred electors. Only the County of Cornwall, as thinly populated, boasted more Members. On the other hand, Lancashire, with its teeming populations in the cities of Manchester and Liverpool, and rapidly expanding cotton belt and industrial towns such as Rochdale, Bolton, Blackburn, Bury, Burnley, Oldham, Wigan and so on, returned a total of twelve!

Obviously, that farcical situation had to be remedied, but the remedy of 1832 was partial. The worst anomalies of parliamentary seat distribution were removed, but the rural shires still enjoyed an unfair advantage. The extension of voting rights under the Act increased the electorate threefold, from approximately 220,000 to 670,000; out of a population of *FOURTEEN MILLION!*. The great majority of those newly entitled to vote were men living in the towns and cities who belonged to the property-owning classes created by the industrial revolution, so in effect the great Whig Reform measure, of which so much was expected, merely transferred some of the political power from the landowning rustic minority to the new industrial owners of capital and those immediately dependent upon them. Furthermore, voting at elections continued to be a public performance, those intending to vote had to attend on the appointed day at a public place and there stand up and declare their preferences, in full view and hearing of the candidates and their agents, their employers and the bailiffs, the local magistrates and all those in positions of privilege who could make life unpleasant for awkward voters! So much for democracy, nation-wide, during the hey-days of the Mechanics' Institute movement!

Now, a moment or two ago I said that social historians of the period appear to have missed an important development which the Mechanics' Institutes adopted from the outset and which they appear, in many areas at least, to have pioneered, and that was the principle of one member, one vote, and, usually, where a poll was necessary, voting by secret ballot. Most Institutes were administered by a Council, elected annually by the rank and file membership, on those principles. Records of voluntary organisations, up and down the country, for those times are scattered and far from complete. There were in fact very few voluntary associations, organised on a national or local basis, in existence at that time, so comprehensive research is virtually impossible. However, despite many hours of research over a number of years, I have found no evidence of any such democratic principles being applied widely in the management of such voluntary bodies or associations that did exist.

One effect that the Institutes had is particularly striking. Men with little or no experience of administration or business, of correspondence or of keeping records, gained some experience during the course of their membership of the Mechanics' Institutes. Not only did many Institutes offer basic tuition in reading and writing, their Councils made annual Reports to meetings which all members were invited to attend, and most did; as a consequence the uninitiated gained experience of meeting procedures. The Institute councils often, also, delegated some of their duties and powers to committees, a useful innovation that was widely copied elsewhere. So, in towns and cities throughout the land, it is possible to discern the parallel developments of other organisations, such as trade unions and friendly societies, and co-operative societies from 1845 onwards, practical self-help movements and other activities, many of them led by individuals who had profited from their interest in the workings of the Mechanics' Institutes. In a way, the structure of local government, with their

administering councils elected by popular franchise, and working through specialist committees, can be shown to have followed the form of Mechanics' Institutes, nationwide. While noting the influence that men whose interest in collective activities had been awakened and stimulated by the examples of the Institutes, I would like to draw support for my argument by diverting your attention, for a moment, to the most spectacular organisational failure of the trade union movement in the last half of the Nineteenth Century.

In 1872 a Primitive Methodist lay preacher, Mr. Joseph Arch, attended a meeting of his fellow agricultural labourers near his home at Barford, Warwickshire. That rally, which was held under a spreading chestnut tree, so inspired Mr. Arch that he immediately set about the formation of an Agricultural Labourers' Union, holding a series of meetings in the countryside. Wherever Mr. Arch went hundreds gathered and most of those attending agreed to join the Union. Proceeding from one village to the next he began a triumphal tour through the midland and southern English counties, founding branches of the Union wherever he went. However, few of those who joined could as much as write their names, none had any knowledge of keeping records, collecting and taking care of funds, of correspondence or "organising" the recruits in any way. Mr. Arch recruited tens of thousands to his cause, but there was no tradition, amongst the humble labourers, of any form or practice of organisation and almost as rapidly as he journeyed about the countryside the Union, at grass roots level, collapsed in his wake. The lessons were eventually learned, and about forty years later Mr. Arch, then a Member of Parliament, was a key figure in the foundation of the National Union of Agricultural Workers which, a few years ago, was merged with the Transport and General Workers' Union. The contrast between the mercurial success of his earlier efforts, and the slow methodical manner in which trade union branches were formed in the urban and industrial areas is marked by one stark fact; of course there had been no successful Mechanics' Institutes in the villages and hamlets where Mr. Arch crusaded, and the hopes and enthusiasms raised on that barren ground melted away.

Before proceeding to other bodies, I don't want to give the impression that it was only in the genesis of working class political organisations that people experienced in voluntary association administration through their involvement with or membership of Mechanics' Institutes were active. Well beyond the middle of the Nineteenth Century there was no such thing as a grass roots infra-structure of organisation adhering to either of the two main political parties, but, as can be demonstrated by the subsequent story of New Swindon, both the local Tory and Liberal associations that eventually emerged owed much to veteran organisers of the Mechanics' Institution. The influence of such people was instrumental, nationwide, in the avalanche of different interest and activity groups that was spawned from 1850 onwards. Amongst those other activities promoted, sponsored or mainly organised by former members of the Institutes you will find a vast range of clubs, societies, associations and the like - horticultural societies, amateur dramatic groups, literary and reading societies, dancing classes; bands, choirs, orchestras; athletic and sporting associations, and so on . . . as the constructive and intelligent members of the working classes moved on from the Institutes so the voluntary organisations to which they transferred their experience and enthusiasms proliferated and flourished.

Now I come to **Proposition No. 2**: which is quite simple. While the great majority of the Mechanics' Institutes which flourished in 1850 disappeared during the next twenty years, virtually alone amongst the large and influential Institutes **ours** is unique in that it survived as a separate body until 1960. That, in itself, was remarkable, but it did more than *survive*, it also served!

## AN EXCITING OPPORTUNITY

That leads us to **Proposition No. 3**. While there are still cavernous gaps in our knowledge of the history of our Institute, there is sufficient already known for us to claim that its story offers the serious researcher or student a unique window on the development of the structure of our social life. There is talk, as I'm sure you all know, of calling this place a City, and of establishing a University here. Well, there has been talk of a purpose built library for more than fifty years, much talk, but no action. There is renewed talk of a new home for the local Museum, to replace the present premises which were opened as a temporary expedient over 60 years ago. Well, if the talk of a University becomes a reality: I suppose - I hope - that there will be a department of social studies.

## REAL HISTORY

I cannot accept that history should be simply a collection of dates or facts, or a record of the achievements or follies of the famous and powerful. *Real history* should *also* involve the common man - it should be *his story* too! And here, centred upon our Mechanics' Institute, we have sufficient material for a University to begin a fascinating and invaluable enterprise. Because our Institute enjoyed such a long life, and for most of those years enjoyed a very large and consistent membership, and because there are records and archives still to be explored, such an enterprise - based here but perhaps exploring parallel developments elsewhere - then such an enterprise would help students and others to see the development of our own complex society and its strengths and weaknesses.

## AN INSPIRING STORY

We come to **Proposition No. 4**: the story of our Institute is one of triumph, of great collective endeavour, and *it is inspiring*. A few hundred Victorians - whose disposable incomes were far less than ours - founded a library and with their weekly pennies built it up so that it eventually possessed one of the best collections in southern England. Through the same organisation they fostered and nurtured a direct ancestor of our national health service. Their Institute was a pioneer in scores of other ways; and, as important as any of its other achievements, in a dark, prejudiced and ignorant age it consistently flew the banner of tolerance and freedom of thought and of speech. There are invaluable lessons in its history for the Swindon and district of today, and of the next century.

So, on to the story of our Institution, or at least, as far as we can get in the time we have at our disposal this evening.

Most of you will know, I'm sure, that the G.W.R. locomotive establishment at New Swindon formally opened on Monday, 3rd January, 1843. You will know, too, that by that time the company's contractors had already constructed the first terraces of cottages in what eventually became the Railway Village, and so accommodation was available for the families of the nucleus of skilled tradesmen, and supporting workers, which constituted the workforce on that opening day. The original number of employees actually in the factory was, we think, around 130; there were others allotted houses on the estate - engine crews, guards, signalmen, etc - other skilled and semi-skilled men arrived later in the year. Long before the original planned number of houses was complete there were more men needing accommodation, so the tenants were encouraged to accept lodgers and virtually all the completed houses were overcrowded before 1843 was out.

Now, while I do not propose to dwell over long on the social conditions of New Swindon during the first ten years when the Works was operating, those social conditions do have an important bearing on the story of the Institute and the role which it fulfilled. Please bear with me, therefore, while I sketch in a few main details. Just over four years after the factory opened, the work-force had grown from less than 150 to something in excess of 1,800. By that time, only about 300 cottages had been completed. Most of the men were married, with families. A fair number - far more than most historians of the town have estimated - were accommodated in lodgings in the old town; others found rooms at Stratton St. Margaret and Wroughton and villages a little further afield. A little speculative building, by private developers, had taken place at Rushey Platt, in the area we now call Westcott Place, but the main burden of overcrowding in the area was borne by the tenants of the railway estate, and the problem was not alleviated within the next four years. We know, for example, that in 1851 there were over **TWENTY** people residing in **ONE TWO BEDROOMED COTTAGE** in Reading Street.

The lack of water fit to drink was a serious problem. The G.W.R. Company constructed a reservoir which was replenished by water from the old canal system. Unfortunately, the canal company owned a beer house and a row of cottages on the northern bank of the canal, near what we now call the Whale roundabout. The effluent - all of it - and by that I do **not** mean just the dregs from the tea-pots - **all** the effluent from those cottages drained into the canal. The railway village, as we call it, was built on an inclined table, the highest point being at the junction of London and East Streets, the lowest at the western end of Taunton Street. The G.W.R. had thoughtfully provided drainage pipes in the back alley ways, and sewage and other effluent eventually drained down towards that lowest point, where a cess pit existed near the present public conveniences at the corner of the park. From there it seeped westward by bogs and streams and much of it also found its way into the water of the Wilts. and Berks. canal. And, the G.W.R. Company paid for water from that canal, to quench the thirsts of those working in its factory and living on its "model" housing estate!

The workmen and their families who had been attracted to New Swindon by the prospect of accommodation in new and pleasant cottages found other drawbacks too. It was over a mile, by the flight of the merriest and most single-minded crow, from the railway village to the shops in the old town. But shopping housewives cannot fly like a crow; the route, across muddy fields and the canal, more muddy fields and then up the winding paths on an extremely steep hill, was tortuous indeed. In those days there were no "made-up" roads, of course. The old town shopkeepers - most of them - showed a marked reluctance to open branches in the new district or take their wares down the hill; with no other option the housewives squelched through the mud and stumbled up the hill. The shopkeepers were delighted and prospered, prices were hoisted on factory pay nights. In response, the tenants of the railway village began keeping chickens, rabbits and pigs in their tiny rear yards, a practice which did not relieve the sanitary problems. House-proud ladies were at their wits end within weeks of arrival. The estate roads were not surfaced, and were consequently either a sea of mud or dusty tracks. No paving stones were laid. Nary a boot scraper was provided at the house doors, the usual practice of those days, and the front doors of most cottages opened directly into the ladies' parlours. The hours in the factory were long, five days from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, with two breaks, totalling an hour and a half, for meals. On Saturdays work began at six but ended, mercifully, at noon.

Most of the families had removed from larger conurbations, where at least there were nearby shops and an abundance of hawkers and other street traders. Most of them, too, had been accustomed, in

their home towns, to some alternative entertainment possibilities, either in concert halls or tavern theatres, and through the facilities of Mechanics' Institutions. At New Swindon they found boredom aplenty, but no water fit to drink, and considerable difficulty and expense in purchasing the regular necessities of life.

## THE UNINVITED GUESTS

On the other hand, two uninvited and unwelcome visitors *found them*, and their families. Those were the bacterium *Vibrio Cholerae* - or cholera - and the silently stalking menace of *Phthisis*, to use the word the ancient Greeks employed to describe tuberculosis. Many years later, in a contribution to a Borough Council publication, dear old John Betjeman, writing of the railway estate as it appeared to an artist's eye in the late Eighteen Forties, suggested that its appearance was *spacious and delightful*. Unfortunately, the doting old versifier had not been shown the burial records of the Church of St. Mark, and was unaware of the grim catalogue of infant deaths recorded therein. Far from being a healthy spot, the overcrowded railway village with its polluted water which positively encouraged water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever, and with its other disadvantages, was a place where the expectancy of life sank below the national average, and remained so for a number of years.

Tuberculosis of the lung is a social disease, its incidence is known to be related to overcrowding, polluted air and poor diet, particularly a deficiency of fresh food. In New Swindon, in the Nineteenth Century, the insidious killer was rampant for decades. It claimed the lives of children and of a number of prominent figures, including those of the first doctor engaged in the area, who was then aged 36, the second Superintendent of the Locomotive Works who was a mere 35, and those of two distinguished secretaries of the Mechanics' Institution, aged 62 and 48 respectively at the time of their deaths. There were many others. I stumbled upon one instance, which I found personally saddening, while I was looking at the early records of the Medical Fund organisation. Early in 1857 they appointed as their secretary one young man who was popularly known as Johnno Short. The name was familiar to me as one who was a member of the Mechanics' Institute Council and who had, according to contemporary records, given much pleasure at the Institute's concerts and social gatherings by singing comic songs, most of which he had composed himself. The first entries by that Johnno in the minute book which I read were set down in an immaculate copper-plate style, flowing, even, but totally unostentatious. The phraseology of the record was crisp and clear. As one who has always been fascinated by the study of handwriting, except my own, of course, I was intrigued. In the entries towards the end of the year I began to notice a definite and progressive deterioration in that handwriting. The style was the same, but the pen strokes were increasingly uncertain, as if made by an enfeebled hand. I remembered a little more about Johnno, and recalled that the Institute Council had lamented his death early the following year. Then, in the minute book entries after the turn of that year, different handwriting, also accomplished, was recorded the appreciation of the Medical Fund committee for Johnno's service. I found an entry in St. Mark's burial register, Johnno was just 29, but I found no trace of a surviving tombstone in the churchyard. Further investigations led me to conclude that he was a bachelor, and lived in lodgings on the railway estate. A friend, experienced in these matters, to whom I am indebted for many valuable contributions of discovery, was able to obtain a sight of Johnno's death certificate, The cause was pulmonary tuberculosis, it confirmed what I had suspected . . . but caused a tear in the eye . . . for Johnno, the singer of comic songs . . . but I digress, and must get on . . .

Cholera showed no respect to age or social class. Amongst those who suffered the loss of an infant

child were Archibald Sturrock, first Superintendent of the Works; William Frederick Gooch, no less a personage than Third Superintendent of the Works and brother of Sir Daniel; Samuel Carlton, a later Works Manager, and many others. I have several friends, fellow researchers, who have looked at those records in recent times. Every one of them has spoken of being moved, a century and a half later, by that grim record.

Given the social conditions that they were called upon to endure, it is no surprise that during the first eight years of the Railway Works' existence the disenchantment of the men, and their wives, was so great that many who could afford to do so voted with their feet and left the district. The labour "turnover" during that period was something in the order of 85%. Serious as this figure is, it conceals the fact that amongst those lost to the G.W.R. during the period were a number of its most promising engineers. At the end of 1847, when a financial crisis affected the fortunes of the G.W.R., two thirds of the labour force was sacked and the rest were put on short time. The crisis dragged on, many skilled men left to seek their fortunes elsewhere; in 1849 the Assistant Works Manager, who has left a diary of his time at New Swindon, threw in his hand. The following year the Works Superintendent, Archibald Sturrock, decided that he had had enough, and went to the Great Northern Railway, taking with him young Charles Reboul Sacré, one of the most brilliant locomotive engineers of his time.

As all of you will know, the Great Western Railway had chosen to follow the advice of Isambard Kingdom Brunel and constructed its tracks to a gauge virtually fifty per cent wider than the standard 4 feet 8½ inches that was being adopted virtually everywhere else in mainland Britain. Most of the manufactories capable of constructing steam locomotive engines and rolling stock, and of undertaking major repairs, were situated in the north of England in the areas of Manchester and Liverpool, or on Tyneside in the north-east. The much wider locomotives and rolling stock could not, therefore, unless transported by river, canal barge or sea, at great inconvenience and at colossal expense, be adequately serviced if the New Swindon experiment collapsed. The G.W.R. was totally reliant on its success and continuing revival. Bad as the financial crisis of 1847 to 1850 was for the Company, the Works managed to carry on, but in 1866 following a banking collapse the Company itself was close to bankruptcy. If, during those intervening years, the Works had closed, or proved incapable of maintaining the locomotive fleet, that collapse would have been inevitable. Fortunately, however, for the G.W.R. shareholders, for all those dependent on the railway in the south and west of England, and for us who live here today, the New Swindon men took matters into their own hands, and in some way with their spirits uplifted by the appointment of a new Works Superintendent, a young man of only 28 years of age, a new era of self-help and social progress began.

### **M. C. REA, ESQ. - THEY CALLED HIM "OUR FRIEND"**

Minard Christian Rea had been a popular pupil of Daniel Gooch and was no stranger to the New Swindon men, having spent some time at the Works before being seconded, for a period, to the South Devon Railway. His late brother, Stuart, had been the first doctor engaged in New Swindon and had played a prominent part in the establishment of a Medical Fund whereby a doctor's attention was guaranteed to the members, through a kind of division or sub-section of their own Sick and Accident Fund. He, Dr. Rea, had selflessly treated the sick, often at his own expense, during the crisis of 1847; almost certainly through his faithful attendance on those suffering from tuberculosis in the cottages he himself contracted the disease and he died in May of the following year, to the great sadness of the little community.

The good doctor's youngest brother, Minard Rea, was an exceptional young man. He toured the Works every day and soon knew every man by name. He inspired pride in craftsmanship, encouraged the apprentices to study, he became personally involved in the affairs of the community. For a period, soon after his return to New Swindon, he was heavily preoccupied by the terminal illness of another brother, Joseph, but soon after the latter's death in 1852 Minard Rea turned his thoughts to ways and means of improving the lot of the people of the township. Succeeding Archibald Sturrock he had inherited the Superintendent's honorary offices, which included the Vice-Presidency and Treasurership of the Mechanics' Institution, Up until that time the Institute had struggled on, making use of a large room in the Works for its meetings and occasional social activities, and storing its library books in another part of the same premises.

Soon after he arrived in New Swindon to take up the position of Superintendent of the Works, in succession to Archibald Sturrock, Mr. Rea became involved in the freemasonry movement. Now, I don't want to involve us this evening in any discussion of the prejudices, for and against, which swirl like an enveloping fog around that subject; suffice it to say at that particular time in its history the British masonic movement was more open in its activities than it has appeared to be in later years, and in particular many of its lodges were heavily involved in charitable deeds and in encouraging good works. Mr. Rea appears to have become fascinated with two words associated with freemasonry, "craft" and "brotherhood". Progressively, during the few years that remained to him, he came to embrace the view that virtually every vocational occupation, if earnestly pursued, embraced some form of "craftsmanship", and that "craftsmanship" mattered for those in lowly situations as much as to those involved in learned or highly skilled occupations; and, parallel with that train of thought, he came to look upon the local Mechanics' Institution as a form of "brotherhood"; conceiving the view that such a "brotherhood" should be open to all who wished to participate. During his all-too brief regime at New Swindon, there were several attempts made by a very small minority to suggest that involvement with the Institution should be confined to those who were in fact skilled mechanics; his articulate persuasion effectively disposed of such notions. In many ways Mr. Rea was a thinker far ahead of his time, one who on a number of occasions expressed the somewhat sensationally radical view, for those days, that despite the loyalty he felt to his employer, the G.W.R., he regarded as even greater his responsibility to the men who worked under him.

In passing, it must be said that we considering, at this moment, an era when the involvement of women - and the question of women's suffrage - was never considered. The society of mid-Nineteenth Century England was a man's world, Nice as it would be to say, his conception of a "brotherhood" which all could join did not, in as many words, go as far as to suggest that ladies could join also; and yet, and yet, during his period of office it is clear that wives, sisters and daughters of Institute members were encouraged to join in such activities as the Choral and Orchestral Society organised, as the phrase of the time went, "in connection with the Institution". To me, it seems that he went as far as it was *practical* to go in the context of those times, with the vision of a "brotherhood" *in which all could participate*.

But Mr. Rea was more than a visionary, he was a practical man, a man of action, too. Through Daniel Gooch, his position as a senior Officer of the Company enabled him to make representations to the Board of Directors. It soon became clear that the Company was not in a position to accede to a number of requests, such as the sensible suggestion that provision should be made for some form of shelter where the men who lived too far from the Works to go home at break times could eat their dinners; far from being able to provide funds for premises to be built for the Mechanics' Institution,



which with the increasing scale of activities that Mr. Rea encouraged was rapidly outgrowing its temporary accommodation in the Works, he learnt, through Gooch, that the Institute would, very soon, be required to vacate those premises.

#### **THE NEW SWINDON IMPROVEMENT COMPANY . . . . AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

The form of action that Mr. Rea conceived involved the piece of land in Ernlyn Square, then known as High Street, New Swindon, which is now occupied by the Mechanics' Institute building. Now then, last year the Royal Commission for Historic buildings, with support from the Borough Council, published an interesting and valuable work entitled **Swindon, the Legacy of a Railway Town**. Concentrating as it does on buildings, apart from a few minor blemishes and inaccuracies, it is an excellent work, as far as it goes. The authors thought it useful to include a sketch which they had found in one of Mr. Brunel's notebooks for a Town Hall, or something of that sort, which apparently he thought would be a useful addition on that piece of land. Unfortunately, the impression that I gained from the interesting reproduction of Mr. Brunel's drawing was that it was included in that volume as evidence of his, Mr. Brunel's, intention or hope of giving the new township a useful amenity. Whether the plan was ever put to the G.W.R. Board is not clear from the book, but to include a sketch of a passing fancy as part of a town's legacy or heritage strikes me as being somewhat irrelevant. It appears to have been drawn around 1842 or 1843, but ten years later nothing of the sort had been attempted, and it is clear from the response of the Directors in 1853 that nothing would ever be done by them to convert Mr. Brunel's laudable intention into reality.

Mr. Brunel himself does not appear to have pursued the idea. In fact, his other preoccupations, with steamships, and with atmospheric railway experimentation in South Devon, and the uncompleted Clifton Suspension Bridge, and the bridge at Saltash over the Tamar, to mention but a few, appear to have prevented him taking much interest in the New Swindon experiment. True, he did accept an honorary life membership of the New Swindon Mechanics' Institution, true he was present at the devotional exercises in connection with the consecration of St. Mark's Church, but I have found no other record of him having visited the town, save for the fact that on several occasions he appears to have alighted from trains and found reason to complain about the fare provided by the Refreshment Rooms at Swindon Junction station. Oh, yes, there is one recorded instance of his kindness to the Institution members, for he welcomed a large number of them on board his last ship, the **Great Eastern**, moored uncompleted at Hungerford Wharf on the Thames, when they went there on a Trip outing, and he is said to have delighted in explaining the machinery then installed aboard to such a knowledgeable and intelligent party.

However, back to 1853, and Minard Rea. Mr. Rea's plan was for a limited company to be formed, and shares in it to be sold in New Swindon and district. The company was to be known as the **New Swindon Improvement Company**. Provided the G.W.R. would make land available at a reasonable rent, and hopefully some other support, he proposed to divide the land in High Street into two halves. At the southern end he proposed the construction of a covered market place, and for "shops", or stalls, to be provided. Traders would be invited to rent the stalls, and the income from that source would be put to providing a dividend for the shareholders, an incentive to their investment. By such a prospectus he proposed that on the northern half of the site the Improvement Company would build premises, including a large meeting hall, space for the reception of the Institution's Library and provision for its Reading Room, hot and cold baths for use by its members, a room where the men could eat their packed dinners - the last two amenities to be managed by the Institution which itself

would pay a rent to the Improvement Company. I believe, although I am not entirely sure about this, that the articles of the Improvement Company provided that, while its officers and directors were to be elected by the shareholders, they were also required to be members of the Institution, or alternatively, satisfactory individuals approved by the Council of the Institution. In effect, if not exactly a requirement of the articles of the Improvement Company, that is what happened. Let us spend a few moments with this scheme. I should tell you that Mr. Rea, in 1853, had begun to take an interest in the affairs of the Medical Fund, and initiated the formation of a committee to supervise and extend its activities. Such an interest is not surprising, in view of the high regard he had for his late brother, the doctor Stuart Rea. He knew, better than most, that dietary deficiency, particularly the difficulty of obtaining adequate supplies of fresh vegetables, was one of the major health problems of New Swindon; he knew too that the livestock kept in back yards in such close proximity to living quarters was a sanitary problem and contributed also to the contamination of the water supply. Undoubtedly he had the authority to prohibit such practices, or least to issue an order, as far as the G.W.R.'s properties were concerned, that they should cease. What would have been gained by such a prohibition would have been balanced by the loss of good will and by exacerbating the dietary deficiencies. If the proposed market could attract traders bringing with them fresh meat, fish and vegetables, so he reasoned, then such prohibition, if it remained necessary, would have been easier to make and enforce, and generally popular.

Mr. Rea and his friends could see no other way of raising the necessary capital to provide a home for the Mechanics' Institution, and the other amenities envisaged. The flotation of shares would be that much more attractive if prospective purchasers could be assured of at least some return, through the market shop rents, from their money.

The proposed authorised share capital was set at £4,000; and once the G.W.R. board had agreed to let the land in High Street for a peppercorn rent the notation went ahead. There were at that time about 2,000 members of the Institution employed by the G.W.R., so the sum of £4,000, had it been raised evenly by that number, would have averaged around £2 a head, which was considerably higher than the weekly wage of most skilled men in the factory. Such a commitment would amount to something between £300 and £400 in relative terms of today. From a generally impoverished community that was something of a tall order, so the shares were also touted around, and, for example, Daniel Gooch put his hand into his already deepening pocket and forked out £50. But such investors - who may well have included John Arkell, of Kingsdown; the old town bank manager, Mr. Wearing; and a rather captivating character of politically radical persuasions, Captain Prower of Purton - such "block" investors were few.

However, in a short time sufficient shares were sold to enable an architect to be commissioned and on Tuesday, 24th May, 1854, the foundation stone of the building was laid on what turned out to be a public holiday. While the success of the flotation, without doubt, owed much to the personality, the enterprise and enthusiasm of Mr. Rea, and the high regard in which he was held by the local community, there is another name whose part in the story deserves an honourable mention.

### **FRANK TOPHAM - WRITE HIS NAME TALL, TOO!**

Frank Topham served Mr. Rea in the railway factory as his "confidential clerk", or as we would term it, secretary. A native of Liverpool, Mr. Topham lodged in London Street; he was, at the time of the flotation, just 22 years of age. Not long before he had assumed the spare-time post of Secretary to

the Mechanics' Institution, in addition to that duty he took on the position of secretary-designate of the Improvement Company, carrying with it the great responsibilities of undertaking the correspondence, keeping the records and ensuring that the investors' cash was secure. What we know of the quiet, polished and competent manner in which he carried out all his other duties is more than sufficient for us to see why he was entrusted with those vital tasks.

### **THE TIDE IS TURNED**

Back to my story. The market hall, which contained 34 shops, or stalls, was completed first, and trading opened on Friday evening, 9th November, 1854. Only a few of the stalls were taken, but those traders who were sufficiently enterprising to support the new venture did brisk business . . . within a few weeks every stall was booked, and through the next few decades the market place proved to be an invaluable stimulus to trade in New Swindon. If you study business development in the place, over the following few years, it is striking to see how the market venture *proved* to the business community of the district that there was valuable trade to be found in the new town, and from the time that market opened we see a new spirit of investment by traders - with Bridge Street and Regent Street, Cromwell Street and Fleet Street, soon outstripping, as a centre for retail shopping, the resources of the old town. But there was another side to that coin. On that first night, ha'penny herrings, fresh meat and vegetables were available to the housewives of New Swindon. Within a year of the market opening the committee of the Medical Fund was able to note, with satisfaction, that the practice of back yard "farming" on the railway estate and around Westcott Place had virtually ceased. Mr. Rea arranged supplies of lime for the outhouses, and the threatening menace of cholera suffered its first major setback. So, even before the Institute premises were ready for use, the New Swindon Improvement Company - which was merely a practical device of the Institution - had turned the fortunes of New Swindon around.

Although the inscription on the stone lintel of the much later south door of the premises as they now exist tells us that the Institute premises were opened in 1855, in fact, the great hall at the north end was specially opened on Friday evening, 20th December, **1854** for what was, in effect, an exuberant celebration of achievement. The occasion was billed as "a Great Patriotic Rally and Entertainment in aid of those bereaved and wounded as a consequence of the Crimean War", and a prodigious sum was raised by the railwaymen for that purpose, and those who packed the hall to capacity greeted Minard Rea as the hero of the hour. Although they appreciated every word of his eulogy of the bravery of the British soldiers in that ghastly conflict, the prolonged cheering that punctuated his address was as much a recognition of his achievement in turning the tide, and changing depression into hope. Although there were grim tunes to follow, in every decade, for the members of the Institute, from that time onwards the triumphant march towards the creation of a happier and healthier town, with the Mechanics' Institution in a central role, that march never faltered.

At this point I will lay before you **Proposition No. 5**: Many years of study have convinced me that during his all too brief regime at New Swindon Minard Rea effectively saved the G.W.R.'s "green fields" development. His personal character had a great deal to do with it: from the time of his return in 1850 he gave the men hope and principally through the Mechanics' Institution building those hopes became something tangible. Had the haemorrhage of skilled and experienced personnel not been staunches by Mr. Rea and his brilliant schemes I believe that steam locomotive engine building would not have survived in New Swindon. But it did: and that is why all of us, the couple of hundred thousand of us who live in the district today, are here.

Without fuss or ceremony, the Institute building was brought into full use during the following May. Not only was the Library and Reading Room accommodated, a valuable and interesting array of memorabilia began to be collected, the nucleus of the first local museum, about which I will have more to say later; men unable to walk home for their dinners could eat their food in a comfortable room, hot and cold baths were available for the members and their families, and, I of great importance, there was much more room for the Institute's rapidly expanding educational activities.

### **"APPLY YOURSELVES DILIGENTLY TO YOUR BOOKS . . . . "**

Gradually, during the following years, the series of evening classes conducted almost entirely by members of the Institute for others anxious to add to or in many cases to begin their education increased, in numbers and in scope. In the course of time with the very gradual improvement - nationwide - in literacy, the need for instruction in the basic skills of reading and writing began to diminish, but the demand for more advanced tuition in mathematics and geometry, in workshop practices, chemistry, the science of metals, the laws and practice of mechanics, machine drawing and related subjects increased. Later, other subjects such as accountancy were added. The scope of classes expanded too into other fields, particularly in literature, music and art, and provision began to be made for the domestic sciences. Ladies were encouraged to participate in those courses, and when the first primitive typewriters began to appear in the area typewriting tuition was offered. Forgive me if I follow this aspect of the Institute's activities through, out of sequence, as it were, until the last decade of the Nineteenth Century, and then on to the first half of this century, because it is one of the most important parts of the Institute story.

One apparently small but nevertheless serious problem for students during Victorian times which the Institute resolved was difficulty in obtaining reliable and accurate drawing instruments at a reasonable cost. In the United Kingdom such appliances had traditionally been made to order by watchmakers or locksmiths, and were consequently expensive; although at Nuremburg in Germany a compass makers' guild had existed since the 17th Century and precision instruments, including spring bow compasses with ink drawing attachments, had been made there using more advanced production techniques for some time. To meet that need the Institute purchased stocks of such instrument sets and made them available to students at affordable prices. As I have already explained, when speaking of Mechanics' Institutions elsewhere, not a few of them became absorbed into the slowly evolving education system nationwide. In a way this happened here, but in a different form. The Institute here retained control of its classes right up until the responsibility for technical education was vested in the new County Councils, which were established following legislation of 1888. In New Swindon the Institute itself financed the educational programme, aided of course by the modest fees which most students paid. By 1871 the Institute had become affiliated to the Government organisation known as the Department of Science and Art based at Kensington, and some grants were obtained from that source. Within a couple of years, with the assistance and encouragement of Mr. Joseph Armstrong, who had succeeded Gooch as Locomotive Superintendent and President of the Institute in 1865, another interesting, progressive and - for the G.W.R. - valuable innovation was under way, when the technical courses for apprentices and engineering students at the Institute began to be harmonised with the progress through the workshops which each young man made. Another extremely valuable innovation was the practice the Institute adopted of awarding scholarships for future education at its own classes to the sons of Institute members who showed promise at the Board Schools in the town. In this respect, although there is nothing written down, a very careful study of those chosen indicates that the Institute Council did not always reward the very brightest pupils in this way, although some of those selected

proved later to be very bright indeed; they also appear to have taken into account the circumstances of the families concerned and, with great tact and discretion, they so ensured that bright lads who could not otherwise afford even the Institute's modest fees were not deprived of opportunity. To me, as one who has studied the workings of the Institute in some detail, it was acts like that which were symptomatic of the overall kindness and understanding that so characterised our Mechanics' Institute.

## **THE FOUNDATION OF SWINDON COLLEGE**

The full story of the Institute's technical education programme is too complex a subject to be explored in detail this evening; all I can do is to lay before you the bones of the story. Suffice it to say that, shortly before it became clear to the Institute that the new County Council would, by Parliamentary decree, become responsible for the funding and arrangement of the work that it, the Institute, had pioneered in the district, plans were afoot for the Institute itself to build a technical college of its own. By that time the Institute premises, and the increasing number of Board Schools, which it also used for its evening classes, were proving inadequate for the number of students involved. When, in 1893, the County authority's plans for its own Technical Education Institute in North Wiltshire were finalised the Institute Council handed over a complete "package", as it were, for the foundation of what was eventually to become Swindon College, in Victoria Road, That "package" included the better part of a thousand part-time students, a great variety of instruction courses, each with its own proven and successful syllabus, a considerable quantity of apparatus and, by no means the least important, a little army of part-time lecturers, trained by the Institute itself and mostly certificated by examination to the satisfaction of the Department of Science and Art at South Kensington.

The new publicly financed technical college also received a flying start in two other ways. The "package" which I have mentioned also included a considerable academic tradition, students of the old Institute classes had achieved a number of notable successes, several gaining the distinction of prestigious Whitworth scholarships; in one year alone Institute students recorded, in the national Society of Arts Final Examinations, a First Class Pass in Mensuration, another in Political Economy, one in Book Keeping, another in Arithmetic, and, to round-off, the Society's Silver Medal! Furthermore, to ensure a smooth transfer of all this to the new college, the County Council was pleased to appoint all the serving members of the Institute Council's Education Committee as the first Governors of the new establishment. Now, as I said time ago, there are instances elsewhere of defunct or declining Mechanics' Institutes being absorbed into the public education system, but those rearrangements took place some time before. This case, of a *still flourishing* Mechanics' Institute handing over was what in effect a complete educational establishment, all but the building, to the local authority is, in such a form and on such a scale, to the best of my knowledge, unique.

## **THE BOARD SCHOOLS, TOO!**

When the first Swindon Local School Board was set up it consisted of the Institute Council's Education Committee, and continued in that form for some decades. The first school sup<sup>1</sup> to be built by that body, under the direction of Institute Council members, was the attractive little building at Gorse

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is incorrect. The Avening Street School was erected by the Stratton St. Margaret School Board, within whose jurisdiction Gorse Hill remained at that time. Consequently the Institute Council had little or nothing to do with its erection, although soon thereafter was affording it the same help and encouragement it was offering to the Swindon Board Schools which were built in the following years.

Hill which survives, in something close to its original form, as a primary school. Other red brick schools in New Swindon followed, Clifton Street, Gilbert's Hill, Westcott, those at Even Swindon, Gorse Hill and Clarence Street. The G.W.R. sponsored schools at Sanford and College Streets were also under the supervision of the same School Board. In the old town, with its smaller population, the Institute's influence was less direct, and King William Street Church of England School was built and supported by the Christ Church authorities. However, the later Lethbridge Road School owes its existence to the Swindon School Board, which by the closing years of the last century could call on the experience of several Institute members who had, by that time, removed to the old town. Amongst those gentlemen were Mr. William Affleck, founder of the Prospect Engineering Works and one of the earliest pioneers and Institute members in New Swindon; the long serving Chairman of the Mechanics' Education Committee Mr. Stanier and its Secretary, Mr. Goudge. Once again we see the Institute's influence at work in the district.

## **TWO GREAT SWINDON TRADITIONS . . . FIRST. TRIP . . .**

I would like to leave the subject of the Institute's invaluable contribution to the town in the educational field there for a moment, and to deal with two of the town's greatest traditions, over more than a century, in which the Institute's role was paramount. They are, of course, the annual festivals of Trip and the Juvenile Fete. First, Trip. No newcomer to Swindon, even in very recent times, can fail to have seen pictures of long lines of Edwardian ladies with large bags and tidy bonnets, of gentlemen with whiskers wearing their best bowler hats standing astride bulging suitcases, and grinning urchins of both sexes brandishing buckets and spades as they all waited for special excursion trains at the Junction station or at improvised embarkation points near Rodbourne Lane bridges. Few, however, are told that all that was the doing of our Mechanics' Institute.

It all began in the late 1840's. The British Association for Science, a newly formed body of the most eminent men in science and engineering subjects of their day, was holding its first annual convention at Oxford, and it was arranged for a party, including a number of the University academics, to visit the New Swindon Works and examine the machinery which had been installed. After their tour of the factory, the distinguished visitors were entertained by the members of the Mechanics' Institute in the large room at the Works where they were permitted to store their books and hold their meetings, and great efforts were made by their wives, mothers and daughters to provide refreshments for the guests. So impressed by all that were the Oxford dons that they invited the Institute members to that city and Mr. Sturrock was able to arrange for the G.W.R. to provide a special train, free of charge, to and from New Swindon for the conveyance of the members and their families. At Oxford they were shown the University halls and other great sights of the city; and later they were entertained in the Guildhall by the Lord Mayor.

So began the tradition of Trip. In subsequent years Mr. Sturrock, then Mr. Minard Rea and their successors were able to persuade the G.W.R. Directors to grant the privilege of a free train for the Institute, which organised the issue of tickets - in itself a tremendous task for part-time Institute officers as the numbers involved grew each year. Each year, too, the G.W.R. was sufficiently magnanimous to allow the Institute members a day off so that they could participate in Trip. In the same spirit of magnanimity, the same members were allowed the privilege of taking that day off *without pay*. The same privilege applied when, years later, the Trip day became a whole week off. All the same, the free ticket for members and their families remained a valuable recruiting sergeant for the Institute until 1932, as men who never borrowed a book, visited the reading rooms or attended

the lectures and entertainments were happy to have the few coppers involved deducted from their wage packets so that, as members, they could give their families a brief glimpse of the sea or a visit to London. In 1932 that feature of Trip came to an end. An agreement negotiated between the four great railway companies of the time and organisations representing all grades of railway staff, at national level, in compensation for wage and salary cuts that had been enforced following the economic crash of 1931, granted an annual free pass to all railway employees. In vain the Institute Council members tugged their forelocks the following year in the annual ritual, there was to be no additional free pass for Institute members. So, the Swindon Institute members, who like the other railwaymen had suffered in their pay packets, gained nothing. The biggest loser of all was the Mechanics' Institute, its most effective recruiting sergeant was now deceased and although many who had only subscribed for the privilege of Trip continued to do so out of loyalty to the Institute, during the grim years of the great depression, with short-time working and low piece-work earnings and a substantial number of sackings, the total of subscribing members showed a significant decline.

The Trip holidays continued however, and after the Second World War payment during holidays was introduced; later, as a result of national negotiation, Trip Week became a fortnight. Some of the Trip traditions remained. One, instituted during the days of Mr. Churchward insisted upon by a solitary and independent individual right up until he retired in the early fifties always amused me. That venerable blacksmith could be prevailed upon, with difficulty, to complete the form of application for his Trip ticket, but he always left the space for his destination blank. The new, unwitting, "clurk" who encountered old Bill for the first time always asked the inevitable question, only to suffer the indignant response "Never you mind where I be goin', you juss get I one o' them tickets!" The more experienced clerical hands usually wrote in Penzance or Milford Haven or some other terminus on the line, so giving the old rascal the choice of alighting at any stopping point on a long journey; every year he went off with his "Missis" so equipped; as far as I know he never complained. There must be as many Trip tales like that as there were Trip trains.

It's in that happy Trip tradition that we see the Institute at its best. The vast organisation, which during the earlier years involved the convening of meetings and ballots for the destination of first one train, then several, and the making out and authorisation of tickets, all put a great strain on voluntary Institute officials. It was not only the Institute members who benefitted from Trip. Those who stayed behind averred that Swindon was a ghost town during Trip. So few people were about that the local shopkeepers did not open on the Wednesday of Trip week, a splendid tradition that gave shopworkers too some benefit from Trip.

There was gain, too, for others living far afield, in the little West Country resorts which the Mechanics' Institute Trippers favoured. Most of those Trippers could not afford even the more modest hotels and found lodgings for their brief stay in the homes of fishermen, boatmenders and other shore workers, many of whose wives would have been hard pressed to make ends meet without the extra income they obtained each year from holiday makers. Trip was always held a few weeks before the main holiday season began, at the understandable insistence of the railway company, and so the influx of Swindon visitors was always, for those folk, a welcome time, when they needed a few extra bob in the slack early summer. It was good too for the small shopkeepers, the confectionary vendors and beach caterers of those seaside resorts. Right down through the south-west peninsula, the coastal resorts and little villages of Cornwall and Devon looked forward to Trip; when, soon after the G.W.R. had absorbed the Cornish railways and the attractive little branch line from St. Erth, past the estuary at Hayle, by Lelant, alongside Carbis Bay and almost on to the beach at St. Ives was opened then the Mechanics' Trippers

discovered a new holiday resort. So Porthminster and Porthmeor Beaches, the Warren, the Island, Smeaton's pier and St. Ives harbour became as much a part of Swindon-for-a-week as Newquay and Looe, as Dawlish and Paignton, as Ilfracombe, or "Ill-frack-ombee" as one elderly and rather pompous Swindon clerk insisted it should be pronounced, as much Swindon-for-a-week as the sands at Weymouth or the, amusement pier, tide in or out, at Weston-Super-Mare. Along the coast of South Wales, at Barry Island, the Gower, at Tenby, around Fishguard, at Aberystwyth, the Trippers ambled, and argued about the footballing achievements of Swindon Town. But's let not lose sight of the main thing, the Institute, our Mechanics' Institute, was a pioneer of holidays for working people.

### **... AND THE CHILDREN'S FETE IN THE PARK ...**

Now for that other great annual festival, the Kiddies' Pete or the Children's Fete, as some called it; but to use the Institute's own, formal, name, the Annual Juvenile Fete. There will be few Swindonians who can remember the days before the last World War who cannot recall the happy Saturday afternoons, in August of each year, when the Faringdon Road Park became the Mecca for thousands. Bands and acrobats, high wire artistes, Judy and Punch; roundabouts and dodgem cars, refreshments and dancing. At 9 p.m., a superb fireworks display. Programme one penny, admission a tanner (sixpence) for adults, children under fourteen free. For thruppence, children could purchase a ticket entitling each to a slice of free cake and a cupful of tea - for those who brought their own cups, of course. Tickets for free roundabouts were to be found in each bag of that cake. 1

And what cake it was! Never has cake tasted better. From the turn of the century onwards the contract for the cake was placed with the Co-operative Provident Society whose Master Baker, Mr. Hudd worked to a secret formula which he never disclosed to a soul. As the numbers attending the Fete grew, the sheer volume of cake became quite a problem. Scores of ladies, wives, mothers, daughters of Institute members, ladies who worked in the upholstery section of the Carriage Department and other volunteers were pressed into service and laboured in the Drill Hall throughout the night before the Fete to cut the cake, wrap each slice carefully and be sure to include the free roundabout tickets. In 1881 the total attendance was 6,371. Five years later that figure was more than doubled, by 1893 it was 20,345 - 10,102 adults, 10,243 juveniles. In 1902 20,725 adults and 14,311 juveniles, 35,036 people in all, attended the Pete. That total figure is considerably more than the highest attendance ever recorded at the County Ground Football stadium.

To alleviate the cake cutting problem - the Institute - scrupulously fair as it always was, down to the very last currant - insisted that each portion should be exactly the same - so a machine, specially designed to divide each large slab of cake into exactly equal slices, was devised. Credit for that contraption has been given to a Mr. William Harvie, a member of the Institute Council who lived in Faringdon Street (as it then was) in the block next to the present-day Railway Museum. However, more recent investigation leads me to believe that it was a Mr. Atcherley who actually conceived the idea but also that Mr. Harvie, who like the popular Johnno Short nearly fifty years before him was celebrated for his comic songs, was involved in the covert arrangements for the machine to be made in the Works without official permission, and had "authority" not turned a blind eye it would have been him, Mr. Harvie, who would have taken the blame. 1

Origins of the Fete: well, once again Minard Rea's fingerprints appear in all the evidence that we have. From 1850, soon after he became Superintendent of the Works and took over the joint roles



of Vice-President and Treasurer of the Institute, an annual social occasion began, or was developed from a more modest event. A social evening, held around the turn of each year, involving quadrille dancing, musical entertainment and a few variety turns occupied an entire Friday evening and Saturday afternoon, with a final flourish, more dancing and music, on the Saturday evening. By 1853, perhaps before, the whole affair was known as "The Annual Soiree", and the Saturday afternoon was devoted to entertaining children of members, who were regaled with currant buns and gallons of lemonade. Amateur conjurers, jugglers and clowns kept the party going, slide shows and dramatic sketches added variety. In conjunction with this, an exhibition of handicrafts and model-making was staged, and the G.W.R. Museum has one fascinating example of a small steam engine made by a Mr. Bickle and exhibited at the Soiree in 1854. For the slide shows what were described as "the powerful Oxyhydrogen Lanterns belonging to the Institution" were used; those lanterns were, I believe, a gift of Minard Rea and first used in 1850, Records of Swindon at that period in time are scanty; but the use of those lanterns is almost certainly the earliest occasion in which pictures were exposed in such a manner for public entertainment in Swindon. By the way, fifty and a few years later, the Mechanics' Institute premises became the first in Swindon to offer an incredulous audience moving pictures on a screen - the town's first cinema show. Like the introduction of the first billiard table, and the first chess club, our Mechanics' Institute led the way, in Swindon and district, in all manner of social activities. Again, I digress; and must get on; so back to the origins of the Children's Fetes.

From the mid-Eighteen Fifties, the numbers of juveniles attending the annual soirees increased steadily, to such an extent that by 1866 the Council of the Institution was forced to decide that even its own premises could not cope with the crowds of youngsters. One half-hearted attempt to solve the problem by splitting the children into two groups and spreading the juvenile activities over two days proved to be an expensive failure; Victorian kids were as ingenious as any and most of them managed to gain admittance to both events. Several years before the Institution's Quadrille Band had attended an event described as "The Annual Meeting of the Stratton St. Margaret Reading Society" which was held in "the little orchard" (wherever that was) in the village. The Institute musicians provided music for the ladies, the gentlemen were occupied with cricket or quoits; and a programme of "simple and innocent amusements" was offered to the children. Prizes were distributed amongst the juveniles for racing, jumping in sacks and similar strenuous exercises. In the evening, the Institute Quadrille Band, under the direction of Mr. Albert Sykes, played for dancing in the orchard, while the Master of Ceremonies was Institute Council member Mr. Huggins.

Now, the interesting things about that event are these: Mr. Huggins, Mr. Sykes and the leader of the Quadrille Band, a Mr. Lacey, were all involved in the subsequent plans to replace the annual soiree with an open-air fete, primarily for juveniles. The first of these took place on 4th August 1866, in Faringdon Road Park. It included the successful features of the Stratton event, including quoits, children's races and open-air dancing; lemonade and buns were given to the children, as in the former soirees; and a number of other attractions were added, acrobats, minstrels, a brass band and roundabouts. There was a precedent for some of those activities, for in 1856, when the Institute Council had organised a special day to commemorate both the birthday of Queen Victoria and the end of the Crimean War and the following day, when a "treat" had been planned for youngsters in the Park, the fun was washed out by torrential rain. **On** that occasion Minard Rea decreed that the juveniles "should not be deprived of their fun" and personally organised another open-air event on the cricket field (as the Park was then known), paying for lemonade, buns and prizes for races from his own pocket. So that first-open-air fete included features of the Institute indoor soirees, of the Stratton event I have mentioned and Minard Rea's generous act of 1856, but with the addition of a

display of fireworks. The same successful pattern was followed right through to 1939, with the exception of those years from 1914 to 1918. The similarities between the attractions on offer on 12th August, 1939 and those provided at the first Juvenile Fete were striking. The children's buns became cake, long before the turn of the century, the lemonade became tea, and of course the numbers involved bear no comparison, but the consistent pattern is there, all the same.

I cannot leave the matter of those Fetes without reference to Mr. George House, of Taunton Street. A man who entered the service of the G.W.R. as a day labourer in 1837, he settled in New Swindon some time after 1850; this is what the Institute Council said of him in 1903 when it reported his death, with deep regret, to the members:

*"It will be remembered that Mr. House was the originator of the scheme by which the children of the Workhouse were enabled to participate year after year in the enjoyment provided at the Juvenile Fete, and no effort was spared on his part to raise the funds necessary for the complete accomplishment of this purpose."* I

Mr. House, in addition to his devotion to the Institution throughout his time in New Swindon, also lent his support to a number of other organisations and good causes. He was a stalwart of the workmen's Sick Fund - the Yard Club - and of the Medical Fund Society. Earlier I spoke of the way in which, throughout the land, intelligent and public-spirited working men who had been members of Mechanics' Institutes in their hey-day, before 1850, became involved in other movements and societies, taking the experience that they had gained within the Institutes with them. Mr. House is an admirable example of that happening here. When he arrived in New Swindon he had virtually no learning and little experience. In the Institute classes he broadened his ability to read and write, the lessons of voluntary organisation that he learned were put to good use in the Institute *and* elsewhere. There were hundreds like him. The point I wish to emphasise, however, is that while others left their declining Institutes, in New Swindon the Mechanics', the driving force, continued to flourish. That is why it was unique.

## **A CIVILISING INFLUENCE**

Mr. House's great efforts for the workhouse children focuses our attention, for a moment, on another aspect of the Institute; its civilised and unfailing generosity. The efforts of Mr. House for those youngsters is by no means the only evidence of that spirit. It runs through the Institute story like a golden thread. There is a comparatively modern hymn, which begins with the line *Bind us together, Lord*. It is often sung in churches and chapels on Sundays. Now, the Institute members, most of 'em, went to church or chapel several times each Sunday, and sometimes during the week, but, really, they had no desperate need to ask their Lord to bind *them* together. It was things like Mr. House's efforts for the workhouse kids, the great family atmosphere of the Juvenile Fetes, the shared joy of Trip, the examples of tolerance and public service which the Institute set, that bound people together. And as Daniel Gooch himself was obliged to admit, after listing the achievements of New Swindon in 1874, including the Institute, the Library, the market, the hospital, and so on "*You did it all yourselves*".

## **HELD AND GUIDANCE FOR THE MEDICAL FUND**

Now, in the time we have left, I want to deal with a few of those achievements, then add a little to what I have already said about the educational facilities of the Institute, and finally, refer to a possible

Roll Call of Institute members, For a moment, let us return to the contribution that the Institute made to the important subject of health in the area. It was involved with efforts to improve Health Care to individuals, and with the wider field which we now speak of as Environmental Health. First, let's look at its contribution to health care, for the sick, or injured, or vulnerable. Let's spare a few moments for the New Swindon Medical Fund. Up until 1853 it appears that this fund was merely a division of the Sick Fund, or Yard Club, which enabled members to contribute a small sum each week so providing a salary for the doctor and ensuring his free attendance on them and their families, and free medicines and the like, as necessary. In 1853 Minard Rea gathered together a group of men he knew and respected through his involvement with the Institute and guided them into forming a Medical Fund Committee. Groping their way forward from uncertain beginnings, using their growing experience of affairs and practices at the Mechanics', they arranged to pay an annual subscription to two hospitals in London and one in Bath, they made arrangements to have available a wheel chair, crutches, an air bed and other conveniences for recuperating invalids; their committee became something of a chameleon, adopting other names occasionally to suit their convenience - they met as the Sanitary Committee occasionally, and carried out tours of inspection of the drains, water supplies and other problem areas in New Swindon, putting right what they could; making representations to the local guardians and so on; meeting as the Weights and Measures Committee, they commissioned Mr. James Squire, one of their number, and possibly the finest craftsman in the Works at that time, to make a set of weights and measures that was to be kept in the Improvement Company's Market Hall and made available when disputes arose between housewives and traders.

More importantly, as far as we are concerned this evening, it is possible to follow, through the Minute Book, a trail which shows how that Committee, composed of grass roots, rank and file workmen, gradually formalised their affairs; the same trail reveals how a number of those who had been fortunate enough to serve on the Institute Council brought their experience to bear; Mr. Barefoot, Mr. Watson, Mr. Drummond, Mr. Dyer; and how two humble but intelligent men, who both had joined, participated, listened and learned at the Institute - first Johnno Short, who died so young and tragically, then his successor Mr. William Richards, were instrumental in preparing the way for the Medical Fund to become a separate Society in its own right, with a framework of carefully considered Rules to meet every possible contingency, the framework for the Medical Fund which we knew and which served as a model for the new National Health Service of 1948.

### **AND SUPPORT FOR THE HOSPITALS ...**

Later, in 1865, the same device of adopting another name to suit a particular purpose, was used by the Medical Fund Society, in close connection with the Institute's Council, for the launch of another great step forward in the history of Swindon. For some time they had been arguing that a hospital was needed in the town, but their appeals for assistance from the G.W.R. had fallen on deaf ears. On 26th of January in that year, with the Institute's Quadrille Band in attendance, Mr. Braid, the schoolmaster and formerly the first Secretary of the Institute, launched the first of many "Penny Readings" in the large Mechanics' Hall, choosing one of Macaulay's better known epic poems to begin the programme. The proceeds of the first few of those reading sessions, which began as an experiment, were devoted to much needed improvements at the cricket field, as the Faringdon Road Park was then known, but once firmly established as popular events for the New Swindon people, the monies raised, penny by penny, were set aside for the hospital project. Eventually, in 1872, the G.W.R., with mixed motives, authorised Mr. Armstrong to build a new and much larger armoury and Drill Hall in a corner of the Park, and permitted four cottages at the end of Taunton Street to be converted to a cottage hospital.

Some donations came from other sources, notably a large sum from Gooch who considered that such an act of generosity, well publicised in the district, of course, was cheaper and more effective than the sums he had been obliged to spend on bribes during his previous election campaigns. So, in 1872, New Swindon at last had a hospital, with the majority of the funding coming, through the generosity of the Institute, from those Penny Readings. Only four beds, at first, and a part-time matron, but eventually it was enlarged to accommodate 40 beds, an operating theatre and X-ray department and a treatment area for outpatients and emergency cases. So, we see that the Institute was a caring and guiding foster-parent for the organisation that, in the course of time, became one of Swindon's most valuable assets.

In later times, the Victoria Hospital (which opened in the old town in 1880, with support from the Medical Fund Society) was supported largely by charitable endeavours, the culmination of which, for many years, was the annual Hospital Carnival Week, and the Institute was involved in that too. Each year, the Carnival Week was launched with a glittering event at the Institute - its premises given free of charge for the occasion - an evening which culminated with the crowning of the year's Carnival Queen.

### **HOMES FOR THE PEOPLE**

Not far removed from the subject of the Mechanics' and its involvement with health matters, let's turn to the subject of housing. The shortage of affordable and decent housing had bedeviled the district since the railway works opened, and was a major factor in the high incidence of tuberculosis in the area for many years. On Thursday, 27th August 1868, the Institute's premises were made available for the launching of the Swindon Permanent Building Society. Now then, we have already seen how overcrowding in the new town was a primary factor in the spread of disease and the general unhappiness that so nearly ruined the entire experiment. In the fourteen years after the building of the Institute premises in 1854 private enterprise had endeavoured to meet the need for affordable housing by speculative development in the swampy fields near the railway estate but those developments were hampered by the shortage of cash. As it was recorded in the **Beano Annual** for 1971, *No Money, Not Funny* - it never is, never was. One Wiltshire building society, the Ramsbury, represented in the town by an agent, had been active in a desultory and half-hearted manner, other funding for housing was available through the savings and lending schemes of such organisations as the Independent Order of Oddfellows and the Ancient Order of Foresters, little friendly societies with obviously limited resources themselves managed by the voluntary activities of such gentlemen as Mr. Hanks and Mr. Laxon and others who had gained what knowledge they had of business and accounting through their membership of the Mechanics' Institute. The Institute's Council was not involved in the actual management of the new Building Society, but most of its principal officers were, and the wholehearted support and prestige of the Institute, its reputation for trustworthiness and fair dealing, were behind the new Building Society from the outset. The Institute's Honorary Auditor, Mr. William Hall, was appointed Secretary, and for a number of years an office in the Institute was made available to the Society for the conduct of its business. A number of the most influential and prestigious members of the Institute at that time served on the Board of Directors. From that time on, it is possible to discern, as one studies the growth of New Swindon, the results of that enterprise, as more and more red-brick terraces, many of them sold to workmen for their own occupation, became available. The success of the Swindon Permanent attracted the interest of other Building Societies, a notable example being the Society at Oxford which provided the funds for the housing in the Queenstown area - hence Carfax, Merton and Oriol Streets. So there, once again, you see the crucial involvement of the Institute and its

members in the progress and development of the town. And health, as we all know, begins with sufficient decent housing.

## **NO TO SLAVERY, YES TO REFORM**

The Institute itself always remained non-partisan, aloof from political divisions and sectarian arguments of any kind, religious or secular. However, there are number of occasions in its long history when its members let their rather radical, essentially humane and libertarian, sentiments be made known. One such occasion occurred in 1863, when the Reverend Mr. Frederick Young, a Unitarian cleric and noted local crank, opened his pulpit to an address by a Mr. Joseph Barker who was then touring the country as a spokesman for the Southern States of America while the Civil War in that country was raging. A heated argument ensued in the Unitarian chapel, with Mr. David Watson, a prominent member of the Institute, and other Mechanics' members insisting that the main issue in the war was whether the iniquitous crime of slavery should be abolished or not. Within a few days of that meeting scores of Institute members demanded that the Council itself should convene a meeting for the condemnation of slavery in the Southern States. Later, on 30th October, 1866, the great Hall at the Institute was packed by a huge crowd which listened to, amongst others, Mr. William Morris, founder of the Swindon Advertiser and Mr. John Arkell, founder of the Kingsdown Brewery, speaking in support of the great movement for parliamentary and electoral reform that was then sweeping the country. In the chair for that evening was Major Prower of Purton, close friend of the late Minard Rea and a life-long radical campaigner. On a less contentious issue, in 1888, the same hall was full when a discussion took place about the possibility of a state pension scheme, with the great majority of those present voting in favour. That was some twenty-two years before the first Old Age Pensions - a miserly five bob a head - were paid out in Britain.

## **ORIGINS OF THE COUNCIL**

The Institute premises have another niche in the history of our town. On 29th March, 1864, a meeting was held in the Council Room of the Institute to establish a Local Board to administer public affairs in New Swindon. Legislation enabling such a step to be taken had been in force for some years, and eleven years before that a Government Inspector had suggested suitable boundaries between New and Old Swindon for such primitive local authorities to administer. Nothing appears to have happened in the intervening years, but that did not matter much because the railway estate, in which the greater number of New Swindonians were still accommodated, was the property of the G.W.R. and the company claimed almost feudal rights in its administration, But by 1864, other housing developments in the area were starting to take shape, and something, or somebody, had to take charge. Already the establishment in the Old Town had decided that it did not want to take responsibility for New Swindon, and had staked out a compact enclave around the original township for its own proposed Local Board. Captain Gooch, brother of Daniel, who had succeeded the late Minard Rea as Works Superintendent and also Vice-President and Treasurer of the Institute, presided at that meeting, and appears to have been responsible for the fact that only a select few were invited to attend. After some disagreement, a panel of members was appointed and the new Local Board took office. The area for which those men were obliged to assume responsibility was far larger, and already more populous, than that of the Old Town. From the top of Kingshill, in the west, near enough where today you will find Seymour Clinic, then in a fairly straight line eastwards to the summit of Eastcott Hill, by the Globe public house at the end of North Street, along the middle of that street to its junction with Prospect Hill, then across open spaces to the old Brickworks, near Rose and Woodbine Cottages on

the fringe of Queens Park, all that land north of that boundary officially became New Swindon.

The way in which the first members were appointed, although rather typical of the autocratic Captain Gooch, was not very auspicious, but within a short time the Local Board agreed upon proper elections and in that manner the first local government in the area began. For some time, the Council Room at the Institute was made available for the Board Meetings. So, there you see, the official organisation which has now become Thamesdown Council, after thirty years as a Local Board, then four years as an Urban District Council, seventy-four years, unified with the old Town as Swindon Borough, next year to become a new unitary authority with much greater responsibilities evolved from those modest beginnings with the Institute as its guardian and host. Let's hope that some day soon our councillors will recognise that much.

### **CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES FORMED BY INSTITUTE STALWARTS**

Earlier I suggested other activities in which those involved in Mechanics' Institutes became the prime movers in a whole range of other spheres. In 1844, in Rochdale, Robert Owen and his friends launched the first successful co-operative society. Only six years later, in New Swindon, Mr. Alexander Braid gave up the secretaryship of the Institute and became the first secretary of the Cooperative Provident Society, when he and Mr. Henry Hornsby, Mr. Thomas Rawlinson, Mr. Samuel Gray, all of whom had been very active in the Institute, purchased a box of bloaters and sold them on a street corner. Shortly after that Minard Rea authorised the group's letting of No. 4 High Street for its activities as grocers and bakers, and in 1853 the society was formally registered. But New Swindon, rather remarkably, eventually produced not one but three co-operative societies. When the original society decided to concentrate its activities on baking a group of its supporters set up the New Swindon Industrial Society and began to trade at Stall No. 8 in the Improvement Company's Market. Once again, prominent Institute members were at the head of affairs, with Mr. George Hemsley as Secretary. Fortunately a register of this group's early members survives, it includes virtually all the names which might be said to constitute the "main timbers" of the Mechanics' during its first thirty years. In 1880, after a disagreement within the first Co-operative society, over party politics at management level, a storm in a tea-cup, really, a third society was formed that year, and two Institute stalwarts, a Mr. Brine and Mr. Sykes, trudged all the way to the canalside mill at Lower Stratton to carry back its first sack of flour. The same pattern, you see, the prime movers were Institute characters.

### **AMBULANCE CLASSES TO XYLOPHONE LESSONS**

The pattern is repeated, in thousands of instances, throughout the Institute's long story, across the spectrum of local society. The first St. John Ambulance Classes were started with assistance from the Institute Council. The Swindon Amateur Swimming Club celebrated its centenary some years ago. One of its earliest officers was Mr. Bremner of Taunton Street, whose two daughters were famed in the area for the sweetness of their singing, noted in the Institute's choir; Mr. Bremner played a clarinet in the Institute band. Mr. Sykes, who I have just mentioned, played the oboe. It was said of Mr. Joah Sykes that no meeting of the Liberal and Radical Association could begin until he was seated in his place in the front row; his brother Albert was the Institute's principal musical director for half a century, he taught many instrumentalists and singers and should be credited by posterity as the inspiration of the town's choral and orchestral tradition; his inspiration being reflected in the success of religious choirs and other musical groups for decades after his death. By the turn of the

century Swindon had several brass bands. Most of the instrumentalists owed their skills to Mr. Albert Sykes.

### **INSTITUTE MEMBERS AS PIONEERING TRADE UNIONISTS ....**

Mr. Watson, Mr. Amos, Mr. Drummond and a handful of others, without mention of whom the Institute story is deprived of some of its richest characters, were involved in the trade union movement long before it became a force in the town. Both political wings, left and right, included Institute leaders when, from 1868 onwards, they began to organise with local associations and committees.

### **... AND IN THE VAN OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY ....**

I don't know if a history of the local Conservative associations exists in any form, or will ever be written, but if it does emerge it will be extraordinarily incomplete without mention of the names of Mr. Dyer, Mr. Affleck, Mr. Simpson, Mr. Trimmer, Mr. Dicks and a few score other Victorians; in our century Major Wright, Councillors Stamper and Lawson; in post-war years Mr. Councillor Fred Bishop who was Chairman of the Institute Council during its final years. The patron saint of the Labour movement in these parts has to be Reuben George, he was an "outside" member of the Institute and a great user of its Library from the moment when he first set foot in the town; Sam Walters, Mayor when the Cenotaph was dedicated, Secretary of the Medical Fund Society for a number of years and an effective Parliamentary candidate in Bristol was one who passed through the Institute's educational system and into public affairs; Billy Robins, who twice contested the Chippenham parliamentary seat, one of the best County and Borough Councillors any of us ever knew was another, so were Arthur Bennett and Bert Sumbler, both parliamentary panellists. Fred Tonge, railway clerk, Labour M.P. for a west London seat from 1945, was a self-educated man through the Institute's Libraries and Reading Room. Syd Casson, County Councillor for Stratton and Chairman of the Parish Council, parliamentary panellist of the Railway Clerks' Association, one of the most amazingly widely informed men I have ever met, where could you find him every lunch time? In the Institute Reading Room. Another Stratton Parish Councillor for many years, one of the most respected men in the parish for decades, was a Medical Fund and Institute stalwart, Mr. Wilf Hathaway, who lived not a couple of hundred yards from this meeting place. A quiet scholarly man who also spent hours in the Library and Reading Rooms.

Alfie Bown! The **Adver** dubbed him "Mr. Swindon" when he passed away, not fifteen years ago. No man ever deserved that accolade more. No man was more aware of his educational shortcomings than Alfie, he struggled painfully with the simplest letter, yet there was not one of us who really knew that kind, decent, wise and generous man who did not have complete confidence in his ability to rise to the demands of any position into which he might have been elevated. He would have made, methinks, and I'm not alone in this, a far better M.P. for the town than several we could mention. And why was Alfie in trouble with his "missis" because he was late home for tea every evening, even when there was a football match or a meeting for which he had to rush out again? Because he could not bring himself to pass through Ernlyn Square without a quick scan of the daily papers. Why, on a Saturday afternoon when Swindon Town was not playing at home could you not find, in the Mechanics' Reading Room, the current copies of the **Economist**, the **New Statesmen**, the **Spectator** and similar weekly journals? Because Alfie had collared them. All that knowledge of current affairs had to come from somewhere.

In the middle of the great divide between Right and Left we find men like the late Alderman H. G. Lewis, Chief Statistician in the Works, rock for ages of the old Independent Group on Swindon Borough Council, staunch Liberal of the old Jo Grimond tradition: you could usually find him in the Reading Room during Works dinner hours. The late "Ginger" Billett, chemistry master at Commonweal School, another Liberal of the old school, founder of the Swindon Branch of the United Nations Association, was another devotee of the Institute Libraries.

### **THE MUNICIPAL TREASURE TROVE**

Let us not forget another man in the middle, the independent Independent but never maverick late Councillor and Alderman "Raggie Powell". When he came to Swindon, around 1890, James Powell could not read or write, but he woke the town up with his street cries of "Rag n' Bone". But before I talk about Raggie Powell I'm going to spend a couple of minutes discussing a few treasures which are at present in the Council's possession. In the G.W.R. Museum there is at least one large water-colour painting of New Swindon, made a few years before the Institute premises were built - the so-called "aerial" view, the work of the former Assistant Works Manager Mr. Edward Snell. Apart from the fact that the painting on display in the Museum was originally presented to Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and that some years after his death it was donated to the Institution by his sons, that painting would be of considerable value on the market today. Apart from the Brunel connection, and evidence of family generosity, there are other bodies who, I'm sure, would be keen bidders if that painting came up for auction. There is the Brunel University, for one; and, for another, the University Library of Victoria, in Australia, possesses a number of other works by the artist Mr. Snell and holds him in high regard. The painting would make an interesting addition to that foundation's collection. How much are we talking about? Five, ten, twenty or more thousand?

Leave that painting ... for a moment. In the same G.W.R. Museum there are other paintings, some of which I am sure will be remembered by old Institute members. There are also some marble busts, including one of Mr. Brunel and another of Daniel Gooch, both by the sculptor Edward Wyon. Mr. Wyon was one of the most highly-regarded sculptors of the Nineteenth Century. Within living memory, both those busts resided in the large Reading Room at Ernlyn Square. The bust of Mr. Brunel was acquired by the Institute shortly after his death, having been commissioned from the sculptor after a collection amongst workmen in the New Swindon factory. The second, the bust of Gooch, was ordered by the Institute Council, at a cost of £22 to the Institution's funds, after he resigned as Locomotive Superintendent of the G.W.R. and also as President of the Institution, in 1865. Their value? Their value? The Lord alone knows ... the name of Wyon alone must enhance their value . . . Mr. Brunel is now a cult figure . . . Gooch, by good fortune and other methods which we are not here to discuss today, acquired a great fortune, from a modest beginning, for twenty years he was a Member of Parliament and in all that time managed to avoid uttering a word in the House; for an even longer period he was Chairman of the Board of Directors of one of the largest and wealthiest private companies in England, a company which at the time of his death employed more people than any other enterprise in the land. Both busts were, in relatively recent times, the property of the Institution. Somehow, they are now in the custody of our Council . . .

I have cited just three assets . . . there are others . . . ranging from a musket taken from the Russian redoubt at Sebastapol and presented to Mr. Minard Rea at Portsmouth by Mr. Bristow of the old town, no doubt in recognition of his efforts for the Patriotic Fund which culminated in that first great event at the Institute on 20th December, 1854 which I mentioned earlier . . . ranging through that



to the valuable collection of books now forming the nucleus of the "local collection" in the Reference Library which we must assume and hope will become the property of this Borough when the changeover to unitary status takes place next year. There were, indeed, a number of such things which were the property of the Institution.

So I come to a few interesting questions. How did these objects of interest and value come to **be** in the custody of the Council? Perhaps the Council will tell us. Were they purchased, and if so, at what cost? Were they donated, and if so, when, and by whom? Were they lent, and if so, by whom, and under what circumstances, and under what terms?

Those are questions which call for an answer, and for a realisation that the Council owes the old Institute for them. But there are other valuables which the Council should have, which can also be connected to the influence of the Institute. So let's return to Raggie Powell, the philanthropic alderman. It was Reuben George who helped him to read and introduced him to Mr. Joseph Goudge. Who was Joseph Goudge? I had better explain. Now, during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century the Institute rejoiced in the assistance of two splendid calligraphists. One was a Mr. McBride, whose talents were usually set to producing colourful and superbly ornamental testimonials and occasional "memorials" (as memoranda addressed to the Great Western Railway Directors were called). The Railway Museum has at least one example of his work. The work of Mr. Goudge was simpler, but excellent, too. Year after year he devoted hours of his time to writing labels on plain paper which he neatly decorated and then pasted into the many prize books given by the Institute; I've seen scores of treasured examples over the years, each one is different, with the name of the recipient and his or her achievement elegantly written, but all in the same flowing style. Beautiful to behold!

Now then, Raggie Powell was taught the general principles of calligraphy by Mr. Goudge, and although his penmanship never approached the standards of his tutor with much practice and effort he achieved a creditable version of what used to be called Winchester Roundhand, which he put to good use on neat little cards which he placed by exhibits which he donated to the Council's later Museum. Raggie Powell also attended a series of the Popular Lectures on the Arts and associated matters at the Institute at which an average of 700 attended during the 1890's. (The Institute Council several times expressed its disappointment at that low attendance!) Those lectures, and his interest in calligraphy, stimulated an interest in Raggie Powell's mind which led to a fascination with pictures, curious relics and bric-a-brac. As he went about the streets taking away the junk that householders did not want Raggie kept an eye open for the intrinsic or curious object, and became a man of some substance. Raggie Powell also frequently consulted the illustrated works on painting and allied arts, and volumes detailing old and rare books, which were kept in the Institute Library. There is, somewhere, a long list of his donations to the people of the town, some of which appeared in the Museum which the Council opened after the First World War. Raggie also gave the statue of Charlotte Corday to the town. Now, some of those pictures and prints, and Charlotte herself, are worth more than a shilling or two. The connection with the Institute and its cultural tradition is not as direct as the busts of Gooch and Mr. Brunel, but it is there, emphatically, all the same.

The mention of these treasures is the basis of my Proposition No. 6; which is that our Borough Council has in its possession, or makes claim to the possession of, an unqualified number of articles of great value, the total value of which must run into many thousands of pounds; the fact that our Borough Council has its hands on many of those treasures can be attributed to the Mechanics'

Institute. The parsimonious and indifferent attitude which the Borough Council has shown towards the Mechanics' during the past decade, therefore, shrieks of ingratitude and is all the more regrettable.

### **INSTITUTE INFLUENCE IN OTHER SPHERES**

But back to the folk of the Institute. The nonconformist Sunday School movement was led by men like Mr. Nicholson, Mr. Laverick, Mr. Brown, Mr. Trimmer and other Institute pioneers. The Congregational church in Sanford Street and its successor in Upham Road owe a great deal to the elder Mr. Stanier and his brother, who between them were involved in virtually every aspect of the Institute's work between 1872 and 1928; and as much to John Hulme Preece, secretary of the Institute for twenty-three years and the lynch-pin of its educational prowess during that period. The Parochial Church Council of St. Mark, for more than a century, counted amongst its leaders men who were heavily involved in the Institute's affairs.

The Institute was never religiously sectarian, any more than it was political in any way. But it had its influences on religious affairs in the town. I have said very little about its great Library. The Institute's records show that for decades the borrowing of books was phenomenal, increasing year by year. Fiction, of course, claimed the majority. But despite the novels and classical works, the Mechanics' also offered a rich store of works on philosophy and theology and *they* were borrowed in great numbers, too. It is not at all surprising, in the light of that, that the sermons of lay preachers in Swindon and district were renowned for their intellectual content; the same hoard of books played no small part in St. Mark's long tradition of presenting an abnormally high number of candidates for ordination to the priesthood.

### **THE LITERARY TRADITION OF SWINDON AND DISTRICT**

The overall effect of that excellent library on this district can never be properly quantified. We can, however, point to a few names of those who profited from it. One was Richard Jefferies, probably by common consent the most famous of local literary figures. Another was Alfred Williams, the hammerman poet, who walked every day between his forge in the Works and his home at South Marston. Another was Dr. F. H. Spencer, who rose to one of the most important positions in the nation's educational structure and left, in his **An Inspector's Testament**, a poignant account of his boyhood here. Yet another was the late Dr. John Treherne, of Downing College, Cambridge, an Old Euclidean who I first encountered in the library during the war years; he has left us two little gems of novels: **The Trap** and **A Walk from Acorn Bridge**; both with local connections. Another enthusiastic and staunch supporter of the Institute was William Morris, founder of the Evening Advertiser and an exuberant writer both in his paper and in his published books. But for all the style of Richard Jefferies, the unusual talent of Alfred Williams, the erudite prose of Frederick Spencer and the genius of John Treherne there are two other writers, both devotees of the Institute Library, who rival if not excel in charm the writings of those already mentioned: they are Frederick Large, author of **A Swindon Retrospect** and Joe Silto, whose home produced books **A Swindon History** and **The Railway Town** I would recommend to any student. Without the works of all those named any list of the town's literary achievements would look very thin.

Although the role of the Mechanics' changed after the century's turn, for decades it continued to exercise a great influence on the cultural and social life of the district.

## **PIONEERS OF THE W.E.A.**

Reuben George is generally regarded as the founder of the local Workers' Educational Association, to some extent that is true because Reuben, a high-profile and charismatic figure, took a leading role in most of its activities. However, he would have been the first to acknowledge that, at his right-hand when the movement was launched, and the guiding spirit of its organisational success, was Mr. Councillor Stanier, who for years presided over educational affairs at the Mechanics' Institute; another who gave it his blessing was the genial Stratton-born Tory, Mr. Councillor Lawson. There, you see, three former Mayors of the Borough, the Liberal Mr. Stanier, the Conservative Mr. Lawson, the socialist Reuben George; all with strong Institute connections, working together to launch another successful and popular movement in the town. And Reuben George, as most of you will know, was a powerful and most helpful influence on the W.E.A. at the highest level through his membership of its national executive committee.

That brings me to another interesting point. Forty-six years ago the Borough Council claimed, in one of its all-too common excesses, that the lectures organised by the W.E.A. in Swindon in connection with the extra-mural Department of Oxford University, around 1908, were the first in the district. I tried to persuade the authorities then - in 1950 - that they were mistaken, for clear proof exists that the Mechanics' Institute - nearly 20 years before the W.E.A. - organised lectures here in connection with the same department of that University. As usual, the Council authorities resented any suggestion that they were in error and ignored the matter.

Now, eight years ago a lady visited Swindon in search of information about her great grandfather, Peter Bremner, one of the original pioneers. Fortunately I had a few scraps of information about him and together we were able to add to each other's knowledge. Her husband, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University, told me, at one of our meetings, that he knew of a gentleman at Oxford who was making some inquiries about the origins of the University's extra-mural department, and that gentleman and I had several interesting telephone conversations. We did arrange several meetings, but unfortunately illness intervened and I was not able to pursue the matter; but what did emerge from our conversations was that the lectures at Swindon organised by the Mechanics' took place **some time** before any record of such activity **outside** the Oxford City limits that he had so far discovered; and we shared considerable excitement about that. It may well be, of course, that other information has come to light since, but all the same it is one of those unanswered questions about our Institute that indicates, once again, its great pioneering spirit. It is a line of inquiry that I hope, one day, somebody with the necessary time and energy will be able to pursue.

## **SWINDON'S WORLD-WIDE REPUTATION FOR ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE**

So I come now to the last of my major points, the worldwide recognition of Swindon as a centre of engineering excellence. This is a subject so complex that the briefest summary must suffice for this evening. During the years from 1871 to the handover of the Institute's technical education activities to the College in Victoria Road during the last years of the Nineteenth Century, Swindon Works and the Mechanics' Institute **together** produced a host of brilliant engineers. The iron hand of Daniel Gooch on the G.W.R., maintained until his death in 1889, restrained and to some extent frustrated the full flowering of that accumulated genius. As a result, many brilliant men, realising that their career opportunities were restricted here, left for other railways at home and abroad. Those who remained turned their abilities towards research and technical improvement. The death of Gooch made

it possible for the last vestiges of the old Broad Gauge to be swept away in 1892, and at last the G.W.R. needed new engines. Under the supervision of the ageing Mr. Dean a series of new and very handsome engines began to appear, but for the first ten years until Mr. Dean's retirement they were, to a considerable extent, experimental. With the assumption of office of Mr. Churchward that pent-up typhoon of talent was released, and Swindon Works gave birth to such engines as the Saints and the Stars, which by common consent broke entirely new ground and established the basic outline of British locomotive development until the end of steam traction.

Ask any group of railway enthusiasts to give you the names of those they consider to be the top five locomotive engineers of this century. I'll wager that the names of four men would be included in most if not all of those lists: George Jackson Churchward, Charles B. Collett, William Arthur Stanier and Nigel Gresley. There may well be differences about the fifth name; some might suggest Mr. Maunsell, others Mr. Bulleid, a few Mr. Peppercorn; I would argue for Mr. Hawksworth, of Swindon. Four of those names were New Swindon Works and New Swindon Mechanics' Institute men, Mr. Churchward, Mr. Collett, Mr. Stanier and Mr. Hawksworth. For their knowledge they owed as much to the Institute and its methods as they did to the G.W.R. As far as Sir Nigel Gresley is concerned, most of us know that he had considerable trouble with the valve gear of his larger engines and was obliged to ask one of the brightest young men at Swindon Works, a Mr. Holcroft. to suggest modifications. The same Mr. Holcroft became a principal adviser to, and influence upon, the work of Mr. Maunsell on the Southern Railway.

If you extend the number of that list to make it the top *ten* there are two others, graduates of Swindon Works and the Institute's training courses who, on any impartial reckoning, must be included: Mr. Holden of the Great Eastern Railway and Mr. Robinson of the Great Central. If we look at the last century, we find Institute or former Institute members making their mark too. Mr. Dean must come near the top of most enthusiasts' lists. Mr. Armstrong's standard goods engines provided the basic design for all the hundreds of small shunting and general purpose engines that the G.W.R. built thereafter and which were copied by many other locomotive engineers. The man who supervised the building of the first steam locomotive engine to run in Japan was a former Institute officer. A certain Mr. Crampton was a very early member of the Institute, his name is still recognised on the continent, and in France in particular, as one of the most innovative of locomotive engineers. Archibald Sturrock and his pupil Charles Sacre both made their marks elsewhere. Former Institute members were involved in railway development on every continent of this globe.

Do you remember that silly affair on the Works site about five years ago when, after ten at night, a series of horrendous bangs signalled the fact that a number of anonymous bigwigs, assembled for the opening of an exhibition of old engines from the York Railway Museum, had finished their modest supper of pickles and pork scratchings, or whatever? Elderly, nervous and vulnerable people - and innocent domestic animals - throughout the urban area - were terrified, while emergency vehicles raced about looking for the site of a major disaster. Neither the York exhibitionists or the Tarmac authorities had the courtesy to acknowledge understandable letters of complaint which were sent by two local Community Councils . . . However, amongst the locomotives paraded for the confusion of the bigwigs that night was a small and venerable engine that had been designed by a Mr. Robert Fairlie. Knowing that it was coming to Swindon, I telephoned the Museum at York and offered them a piece of information about Mr. Fairlie. A somewhat disdainful young lady told me that the York Museum knew all about its exhibits and declined to connect me with any other functionary. So Mr. Fairlie's engine was exposed at Swindon by the *omniscient ignorami of York* without my scrap of

information. I think it would have been nice for local visitors to the exhibition, at least, to have been told that Mr. Fairlie had been a pupil of Minard Rea at Swindon Works; but they were not. It would have been nice, too, for some tribute to have been made, here at Swindon, to that illustrious former member of the local Mechanics' Institution, but it wasn't. Nobody bothered to tell the visitors that Mr. Fairlie's engines were the only ones that could haul mineral trains up the steep gradients of the railway line between Mexico City and its port of Santa Cruz; that his work on the Moscow to St. Petersburg railway had earned him the honour of a specially struck medal produced on the orders of the then Czar of Russia; and that as a pupil of Minard Rea the same Mr. Fairlie was a member of the Mechanics' Institute here.

We could go on about the achievements of former Mechanics' Institute members for hours; there is still a great deal to be discovered. I trust, however, that I have given you enough names to support my **Proposition No. 7**: that in the story of the Mechanics' Institute there is evidence to show that not only was it virtually unique because of its longevity, its membership roll over more than a century includes a range of talent that no other **local** organisation, here or elsewhere in the country, could rival; and that we can claim that it was the largest, most influential and most successful of all the Mechanics' Institutes.

Sorry, I've forgotten something. I've already quoted the **Beano Annual**, 'tis strange how out of the pages specially written for babes we can sometimes discover not only words of wisdom but extraordinary items of fascinating information. Most of you will have enjoyed - or suffered - the adventures of Thomas the Tank engine and his friends with your children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces and so on. Most of you know that the chaotic affairs of the railway on the island of Sodor are presided over by a character known as the Fat Controller. Well, our grandson's copy of the Thomas the Tank Engine Annual for 1994 included the claim that the Fat Controller had "served his time" with the Great Western Railway at Swindon Works! Unfortunately, I've not been able to find any record of *his* membership of the Mechanics' Institution. Now, for years I've cherished the hope that one day we will be able to reform the Mechanics' Institution, making use of the preserved and restored premises in Ernlyn Square as its headquarters; an organisation which, as Minard Rea envisaged, all could join, an organisation which would bring us and bind us together; something, in this confusing world, we so desperately need. After all, times change, but values don't. And perhaps, following the precedent of the case of Mr. Brunel, we could make the Fat Controller - I think his name is Sir Topham Hatt - we could make him an honorary life member - I think for all the pleasure he and his friends have given millions of kids - he deserves it!

**HAMLET WITHOUT THE PRINCE OF DENMARK; or, for that matter, Julius Caesar without the Conqueror of Gaul; Richard III without the Duke of Gloucester; Othello without the Moor of Venice; Thamesdown without its Metal Cows ...**

Now, I understand that the Borough Council is determined to establish what it is pleased to call a **Heritage Museum** on the old railway works site, and that application has been made to the Millennium Commission for funds to support the complete accomplishment of that purpose. It is hoped, I gather, that thousands of tourists will be attracted to this place where they will see a few steam locomotive engines and purchase litres of popcorn. From what I have seen of the Prospectus for this enterprise I gather that the same visitors will go away convinced that here steam locomotives were made by men who were cosseted from cradle to grave by benevolent paternalism, who lived in idealistic cottages where everything imaginable was provided for them.

No doubt all that is very nice, but it is also rubbish. The true story of this place is one of grim struggle, but one in which adversities were matched and eventually defeated by human endeavor, and central to that endeavor was the Mechanics' Institute. So I come to my **Eighth and last Proposition**: it is that any attempt to present the Heritage of Swindon and its vicinity **without** the Institute will be, in two words, **FRAUDULENT BALDERDASH**.

I do not propose, this evening, to enter the minefield of what our Borough Council has or has not done about the Institute. To adapt a line from one of Mr. Charles Wesley's finest hymns, No **condemnation now I bring**. Matters are too urgent for that. Let's start again, and remind ourselves of Alexander Pope's words: **Hope springs eternal in the human breast**.

I hope that the information that I have laid before you will help the Trust to prepare its case for a renewed application for financial assistance, for surely we have something here that must endure throughout the next century; I hope that the Preservation Trust will be able to convince the Council of that much also and persuade it to put an end to pious resolutions and evasions, and to make a **proper and tangible contribution** to the Trust's laudable aims.

The Institution itself - by that I mean the body of its membership - was greater than its building, but that building itself was a milestone of achievement; it proved to be the keystone of the archway through which the people of this area marched to a better educated, more cultured, healthier, more prosperous, better housed, more tolerant and happier future; to become a community that **was** at ease with itself.

That splendid poet John Keats, in his **Ode to Melancholy**, cried out: **NO, NO, GO NOT TO LETHE** - using the word Lethe - the name of one of the rivers of Hell - for **oblivion**. Shakespeare used the same word, Lethe, in the same sense, in **Hamlet**; Charles Lamb did the same in his **Essays of Elia**; Alexander Pope employed the word in **The Dunciad**; Thomas Campbell likewise in his poem **Absence**; that great engineer Thomas Telford, in a moving poem he wrote in memory of his hero Robert Burns, did the same.

A few weeks before the Institute Library closed a group of us went there and persuaded the Librarian to purchase a copy of a little booklet of poems for which a crippled lad from Oldham had borrowed a few words from John Keats and called his own collection **Not to Lethe**. Incidentally, that courageous young poet spent several happy weeks here in Stratton on holiday and later married a wheelchair bound lass from Swindon's Cheney Manor Road. Councillor Miss MacRea's late father was one of the group which went to the Mechanics' with that book. The Librarian paid the requested two shillings for **Not to Lethe** - from the petty cash. In all probability it was one of the last, if not *the* last, of the Library's purchases.

So, for the Institute, I repeat John Keats' words: **NO, NO, GO NOT TO LETHE**, and with those in a position to help but who prefer to bury their heads in the sand also in mind, I offer this stanza from Mr. Telford's homage to Rabbin Burns as my last tribute to the Mechanics':

**But thy fair name shall rise and spread,  
Thy name be dear to all,  
When down to their oblivious bed,  
Official insects fall.**

*"Dramatis Personæ"*  
**INDEX OF PEOPLE MENTIONED IN TEXT**

For Key to Abbreviations please see Page 3

**AFFLECK**, William; born Gateshead 1816, died 1894. Practical Engineer, early resident New Swindon, left GWR to establish own foundry at Prospect, Old Town. *18, 27*

**AMOS**, James; born Bristol. Boilermaker, one of earliest members of Boilermakers' Society; *27*

**ARCH**, Joseph; 1826-1919, Agricultural Labourer, Prim. Methodist Local Preacher, founded first trade union for agricultural workers, later became a crusading M.P.; *7*

**ARKELL**, John; Farmer, Kingsdown, Stratton St. Margaret, established Kingsdown Brewery 1843, radical political campaigner, contested Borough & Hundreds of Cricklade as Independent, 1874 General Election; *14, 25*

**ARMSTRONG**, Joseph; born Bewcastle 1816, died 1877. Early life in Canada then Newburn, nr. Newcastle. Long career on railways before becoming Locomotive, Carriage & Wagon Superintendent GWR, President, M.I. 1865-77; *16, 23*

**ATCHERLEY**, Mr.; Resident of Swindon late 19th C., active in local organisations; *20*

**AUSTEN**, Miss Jane; 1775-1817, English novelist (*Emma, Pride and Prejudice*, etc.); *5*

**BAREFOOT**, George; Coppersmith, early M.P. committee member, many years M.I.C.; *23*

**BENNETT**, Mr. Councillor Arthur Madge; GWR employee, A.E.U. stalwart, post W.W.2 Labour councillor S.B.C.; *27*

**BETJEMAN**, Sir John; 1906-84, English poet and writer; *10*

**BILLETT**, A. W. ("Ginger"); School teacher, chemistry master, Commonweal School, prominent in Baptist Tabernacle and United Nations Assn.; *28*

**BIRKBECK**, Professor George; 1776-1841; Prof. of Natural History, Glasgow; pioneer of lectures for working men, Glasgow and London, established Birkbeck Inst., London 1824; *2*

**BISHOP**, Mr. Councillor Frederick E.; Clerk, GWR Stores Dept., Independent Group councillor for East Ward, post W.W.2, S.B.C.; M.I.C. post W.W.2, Conservative; *27*

**BOWN**, Mr. Councillor (sometime Alderman) Alfred James; Swindon Labour politician, member A.E.U.; Councillor post W.W.2 S.B.C. & W.C.C.; *27*

**BRAID**, Alexander James; First head teacher GWR schools, Bristol Street, first secretary M.I. 1844-1850; founder member Swindon Co-operative Provident Society, 1850; *23*

**BREMNER**, Peter; born Dundee 1822, died 1868. Some time in Prance before settling in New Swindon C.I 848. Musician, M.I. orchestra; founding member Swindon Amateur Swimming Club.; *26*

**BRINE**, Frederick; engine smith, GWR Works, sometime M.I.C.; amongst founders of Kingshill Co-op; *26*

**BRISTOW**, Sadler; Old Swindon resident, personal friend of M. C. Rea; *28*

**BROWN**, William; born Scotland, early New Swindon resident, active in Wesleyan movement; *30*

**BRUNEL**, Isambard Kingdom; 1806-59, Engineer, G.W.R., hon. life member, M.I. (only known case); *11, 13, 28, 33*

**BULLEID**, O. V. S.; Chief Mechanical Engineer, Southern Railway 1937-1947, previously assistant to N. Gresley, L.N.E.R.; *32*

**BURNS**, Robert ("Rabbie"); 1759-96, Scottish poet; *34*

**CAMPBELL**, Thomas; 1777-1844, Scottish poet; *2, 34*

**CARLTON**, Samuel; Works Manager, GWR Loco Dept, died

1896; *11*

**CASSON**, Sydney Clarence; Railway Clerk, long-term Labour & R.C.A. activist, Chairman, Stratton Parish Council, member WCC; *27*

**CHURCHWARD**, George Jackson; Chief Mechanical Engineer, GWR, 1902-1922, President M.I.; *19, 32*

**COLERIDGE**, Samuel Taylor; 1772-1834, English poet; *2*

**COLLETT**, Charles Benjamin; Vice-President subsequently President M.I., Chief Mechanical Engineer, G.W.R. 1923-41; *32*

**DEAN**, Captain William; Locomotive, Carriage & Wagon Supt., G.W.R., 1877-1902, President M.I.; *32*

**DICKS**, George T.; Sometime M.I.C.; active in M.I. dramatic circles, political agent to Daniel Gooch; *27*

**DRUMMOND**, James; Early New Swindon resident, long career in trade union, co-operative and radical political movements, active in Medical Fund, sometime M.I.C.; *23, 27*

**DYER**, Richard Llewellyn; born Cardiff (English parents) 1840, New Swindon by 1851, died 1924. Boilermaker, became Senior foreman Loco. Works, active in S.F.S. and M.P.S., St. Mark's P.C.C., Swindon Engineering Society, Conservative associations, long-term M.I.C.; *23, 27*

**FAIRLIE**, Robert, Native of Scotland, pupil of M. C. Rea at Swindon Works c.1852-5; internationally famous locomotive engineer specialising in powerful engines for narrow gauge railways; *32, 33*

**GRAY**, Samuel; born 1803 at Bath, a pattern maker, one of the first men to settle in New Swindon and also amongst the first to remove from the railway into a private home of his own, a founder member of the Co-operative Provident Society; *26*

**GEORGE**, Mr. Councillor (sometime Alderman) Reuben; born at Gloucester, apprenticed in Gloucester Carriage & Wagon Works but owing to hand injury became representative for Wesleyan Insurance Society, removed to Swindon c.1890; early member Swindon Trades Council, active in local political affairs, Mayor, Councillor & Alderman, S.B.C., member W.C.C.; founder member of Swindon Labour Party & Swindon W.E.A.; national executive member W.E.A., Died 1936; *27, 29, 31*

**GOOCH**, Sir Daniel; born Bedlington, Northumberland 1816, early working career at Tredegar, Newton-le-Willows, Dundee & Newcastle, appointed Locomotive Supt. G.W.R. 1837, President M.I. 1844-1864; Chairman G.W.R. Co. 1865 until death in 1889, M.P. (Conservative) for Borough & Hundreds of Cricklade 1865-1885; *11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 22, 28, 31*

**GOOCH**, William Frederick; born Bedlington, younger brother of Daniel, above; Works Supt. New Swindon 1857-1864, Vice-president & Treasurer M.I. 1857-1864, President M.F.S. 1859-1864, subsequent career with Vulcan Foundry, Newton-le-Willows, died 1915; *11, 25*

**GOUDGE**, Joseph; Railway Clerk, prominent in educational activities M.I.; *18, 29*

**GRESLEY**, Sir Nigel; Chief Mechanical Engineer, Great Northern and subsequently L.&N.E. railways; *32*

**GRIMOND**, Joseph; Liberal politician and M.P., post W.W.2; *28*

**HALL**, William; Native of Ireland, uncle by marriage of Richard Jefferies, senior railway clerk, auditor M.I., first secretary Swindon Permanent Building Society; 24

**HANKS**, Robert; born Bristol 1795, engine fitter, early experience with railway engines at Newton-le-Willows, arrived in New Swindon c.1842, pioneer of Widows' Hope Lodge, Independent Order of Odd Fellows (Manchester Unity) at New Swindon, killed by tragic accident G.W.R. Works 1866; 24

**HARVIE**, William; Senior foreman, Carriage works, long-term M.I.C.; 20

**HATHAWAY**, Wilfred J.; Railway Cleric, long-term member, sometime chairman Stratton St. Margaret Parish Council, pre and post W.W.2, active in M.F.S., church & Labour Party affairs; 27

**HATT**, Sir Topham (alias The Fat Controller), fictional character; 33

**HAWKSWORTH**, Frederick William; born Swindon, apprenticed in Loco. Dept., Chief Draughtsman 1925-1941, Chief Mechanical Engineer G.W.R. & President of M.I. 1941-7, member St. Mark's P.C.C. & choir for many years; 32

**HAZLITT**, William; 1778-1830, one of the greatest of English literary essayists and critics, sometime resident of Winterslow, Wilts.; 2

**HEMSLEY**, George; from Newcastle, one of the second "wave" of immigrants to arrive in New Swindon from the Tyneside area, between 1847 and 1853, a very intelligent engineer with a wide range of interests, the first Secretary of the New Swindon Industrial Society, the second co-operative to be formed in the town; a prominent supporter of the radical Liberal cause; 26

**HOLCROFT**, Harold; G.W.R. tad subsequently Southern Railway engineer, trained at Wolverhampton & New Swindon, biographer of Armstrong family and author of articles and works on steam locomotive engines; 32

**HOLDEN**, James; Vice-President M.I., subsequently Locomotive Superintendent, Great Eastern Railway; 32

**HORNSBY**, Henry; born Whitehaven, Cumberland, engine turner, one of the earliest New Swindon residents, arrived in the area after working at Patricroft, near Manchester, active in the M.I., the Medical Fund and as a founder member of the Co-operative Provident Society in 1850; 26

**HOUSE**, George; Began career with G.W.R. in 1837, subsequently, circa 1852, moved to New Swindon, active in S.F.S. & M.F.S., Ic-ig-term M.I.C.; 22

**HUDD**, Mr., Master Baker, Co-operative Provident Society; 20

**HUGGINS**, William H.; Long-term M.I.C. mid-19th Cent.; 21

**JEFFERIES**, Richard; born Coate, nr. Swindon 1849, died Goring-on-Sea 1887; reporter *North Wilts. Herald*, subsequent career as author, novelist and naturalist; 30

**KEATS**, John; 1795-1821; English poet; 2, 34

**LACEY**, John; born Cam, nr. Dursley, Glos, 1812, died 1899, lathe turner, moved to New Swindon 1843, talented musician & leading member of M.I. Choral & Orchestral Union; 27

**LAMB**, Charles; 1775-1834, English poet; 34

**LARGE**, Frederick; Composer with *North Wilts. Herald*, died c.1930, author of *A Swindon Retrospect*; 30

**LAUD**, Archbishop William; 1573-1645, Archbishop of Canterbury during reign of King Charles I; 4

**LAVERICK**, William; born Bedlington, Northumberland, died 1890, early career at Bedlington Iron Works, moved to New Swindon c. 1847; long-tem Superintendent New Swindon

Wesleyan Methodist Sunday Schools; 30

**LAWSON**, Mr. Councillor William Henry; railway clerk, born Stratton St. Margaret, died shortly before W.W.2, long involvement with M.I. and M.F.S., early member S.B.C. and sometime Mayor, long association with Conservative politics; 27, 31

**LAXON**, Robert; born Lowestoft 1803, died 1890, coppersmith, joined G.W.R. at London in 1840, moved to New Swindon 1843, pioneer of New Swindon's Court Briton's Pride No, 1597, Ancient Order of Foresters, first secretary M.F. Committee, 1853; 24

**LEWIS**, Mr. Alderman H. G.; Chief Statistician, G.W.R. Works, long-term member S.B.C. and stalwart of Liberal Party & S.B.C. Independent Group post W.W.2; 28

**MACAULAY**, Lord Thomas Babington; 1800-59, English author, poet and historian, Member of Parliament (Liberal/Radical) for Calne, Wilts., 1830-2; 23

**MacREA**, Alexander Sutherland; Native of Scotland, born circa 1910, died 1963, sometime insurance agent, Glasgow and later post-master at Aberdour, Fife, subsequently lecturer and organiser for National Council of Labour Colleges, Secretary/Agent Swindon Labour, Party 1956-8, poet and playwright; 34

**MacREA**, Wanda; Miss Councillor, daughter of above, member of T.B.C. & from 1997 S.B.C.; 34

**MAUNSELL**, R. L.; Chief Mechanical Engineer, Southern Railway, 1923-37; 32

**McBRIDE**, R.; a 19th C memier of the Institute who specialised in producing the most elaborate and attractive works of penmanship; there is at least one example of his craftsmanship preserved in the Swindon G.W.R. Museum; 29

**McCOYE**, Roye; born Oldham, Lanes, 1932, died 1963; English poet and founder of *Elegreba* poetry magazine, wheel-cheer confined from boyhood, resident of Cheshire Home at Kington Langley 1958-61; 34

**MENDELSSOHN**, Felix; (Jakob Ludwig Mendelssohn-Bartholdy) 1809-1847, German musician and composer; 5

**MORRIS**, William; born Gloucestershire circa 1828-30, died 1892, brought to Swindon during early childhood, father bookseller in Wood Street, Old Swindon, set up as letterpress printer circa 1848, founded *Swindon Advertiser* January 1854, long-term enthusiast for M.I. activities; contested Parliamentary General Election as Radical and Working Man's candidate 1874, long association with Swindon Liberal and radical politics, author of *Swindon Fifty Years Ago, More or Less* (1885) and other works; 25, 30

**NASMYTH**, James; 1808-90, Engineer, inventor of Steam Hammer and other workshop appliances; 4

**NICHOLSON**, William; born Cumberland 1809, died 1880, moved to New Swindon c. 1844, after locomotive experience at Manchester and later with G.W.R. in London, skilled fitter and turner and senior Works foreman, devout Wesleyan Methodist and first Superintendent of Wesleyan Sunday Schools in the area; 30

**OLD BILL** (Blacksmith); 19

**OWEN**, Robert; 1771-1858, political and social reformer, founded first practical co-operative society at Rochdale, Lancs. 1844; 26

**PARRY**, Mrs. Martha; Chairperson of the Preservation Trust meeting of 11 July 1996, at which this Public Lecture was delivered; 1

**PEPPERCORN**, Arthur H.; Chief Mechanical Engineer, L.N.E.R., 1946-7; 32

**POPE**, Alexander; 1688-1744, English poet; 34



**POWELL**, Mr. Councillor James E. ("Raggie"); "Rag and Bone" merchant, settled in Swindon c. 1890, subsequently became member and Alderman of S.B.C., died c.1929, town benefactor, gave Gorse Hill Recreation Ground and Powell Ground, Savemake Street, plus many valuable museum items, to the town; 28, 29

**PREECE**, John Hulme; born Tenby, S. Wales c. 1823, died 1885, settled in New Swindon c. 1861, railway clerk, Secretary M.I. 1862-85, also active in affairs of Congregational Church; 30

**PROWER**, Captain (later Major) John E.; Prominent in north Wilts, society and political circles during mid-19th C., County magistrate, resident of Purton, military career with Wilts. Yeomanry and Volunteer Rifle force, noted Liberal and radical political activist; 14, 25

**RAWLINSON**, Thomas; born 1809, Uxbridge, Mx., a locomotive painter, one of the founders of the first Co-operative enterprise in New Swindon; 26

**REA**, Minard Christian; born County of Kilkenny, Ireland, 1822, died 1857, youngest son of Revd. Joseph and Mrs. Rea, first engineering pupil of Daniel Gooch, some time at New Swindon soon after G.W.R. Works established, subsequently engineer on South Devon Railway before succeeding Archibald Sturrock as deputy to Gooch and Superintendent of New Swindon works in 1850, initially active in freemasonry movement, Vice-President & Treasurer of M.I. 1850-7, Chairman & Director of New Swindon Improvement Company, 1853-7, active supporter of many other local organisations; 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 33

**REA**, Joseph Christian, brother of Stuart and Minard, died at New Swindon 1852; 12

**REA**, Dr. Stuart Keith; born County of Kilkenny, Ireland c.1813, died 1848, phusician and surgeon, moved to New Swindon c. 1844 and acted as surgeon to G.W.R. Co., first surgeon to M.P. 1847-8; 11, 14

**RICHARDS**, William John; railway clerk, settled in New Swindon by 1856, sometime M.I.C., secretary to M.P. committee and major figure in formation of M.F.S. in 1859, secretary of M.P. S. 1859-61; 23

**ROBINS**, Mr. Councillor William; railway clerk, prominent local Labour politician, pre and post W.W.2, member S.B.C. & W.C.C.; sometime Labour Parliamentary candidate for Chippenhan Division; 27

**ROBINSON**, J. G.; apprenticed at Swindon Works, subsequently became Chief Mechanical Engineering, Great Central Railway; 32

**SACRÉ**, Charles Reboul; pupil of Archibald Sturrock, left New Swindon with him in 1850 to join Great Northern Railway, subsequently Locomotive Superintendent, Great Central Railway; 11

**SHAKESPEARE**, William; 1564-1616, English poet and playwright; 34

**SHORT**, John (Johnno); antecedents unknown, railway clerk settled in New Swindon by 1855, M.I.C., secretary of M.F. at time of his death in 1858; 10, 20, 23

**SILTO**, Joseph; former railway wagon examiner, author of *The Railway Town and A Swindon History*, well-known in local cricket and football circles; 30

**SIMPSON**, Robert; brass finisher, native of Edinburgh, moved to New Swindon shortly after 1851, active in M.F. and later in Conservative party affairs, sometime M.I.C.; 27

**SNELL**, Edward; born Bamstaple, Devon, 1820, apprenticed at Bath foundry of Henry Stothert in 1834, became draughtsman with G.W.R. at New Swindon c. 1843, dissatisfied with social conditions he left area soon afterwards but returned

to become chief draughtsman in 1845, as such he was responsible for the drawings for the locomotive *Great Western*, the first locomotive completely built at New Swindon, later appointed Assistant Works Manager. A talented artist, he was responsible for the well-known water-colour painting of St. Mark's Church, the cricket field, railway works and estate etc, c.1847. He migrated to Australia in 1849 where he was involved in mining and railway engineering, and produced many detailed water colour sketches of the flora and fauna of the Australian "out-back"; 25

**SOUTHEY**, Robert; 1717-1843, English poet, poet laureate 1813-43; 2

**SPENCER**, Dr. Frederick H.; born circa 1870, son of long-term M.I. Council member, became pupil teacher at Sanford Street before moving to London c.1891 where he followed a successful career in education; his autobiographical work *An Inspector's Testament* (1938) contains many references to his early life in the town; 30

**SQUIRE**, James; born Hebbum, Durham, 1818, settled in New Swindon by 1850, reputed to have been the most skilled fitter in the Loco works, he made the first set of "weights and measures" used in the Improvement Company's market, constructed models and experimented with electro-magnetism; 23

**STAMPER**, Mr. Councillor J.; early copies of the *G.W.R. Magazine* (after 1900) contain a number of articles by Mr. Stamper about the types and value of printed forms used in the Swindon works; a sometime member of S.B.C. he collected all types of forms from other local authorities and continually urged the Council to use those he considered most suitable, an active supporter of the Conservative party; 27

**STANIER**, Sir William Arthur; born Wellington Street, New Swindon, Vice President and later President M.I., principal assistant to C. B. Collett 1923-31, subsequently Chief Mechanical Engineer L.M.S.R. until retirement in 1944; 32

**STANIER**, Mr. Councillor William Henry; father of above, native of Wolverhampton, railway clerk, moved to New Swindon circa 1873, Vice-president M.I. and leading figure in development of educational activities, member S.B.C. and sometime Mayor; 18; 30, 31

**STEPHENSON**, George; 1781-1848, Pioneer of steam locomotive engineering in Britain, railway engineer of Stockton & Darlington and Liverpool and Manchester railways, etc., etc.; 3

**STEPHENSON**, Robert; 1803-59, only son of above, principal of Robert Stephenson & Co. Ltd., Newcastle-on-Tyne, leading railway engineer; 4

**STURROCK**, Archibald; born c. 1816, died 1909, native of Dundee, first Supt. of New Swindon Loco Works, resigned to become Loco Superintendent of Great Northern Railway 1850; 11, 12, 18

**SUMBLER**, Bert; prominent local Labour politician, contested parliamentary election at Bridgwater, A.E.U. and Co-operative movement enthusiast and sometime member of Swindon & District Co-operative Society Management Committee; 27

**SYKES**, Albert; native of Leeds, engine builder, resident at New Swindon by 1849, talented musician and conductor, leader of M.I. Choral & Orchestral Union for many years, died 1894; 21, 26

**SYKES**, Joah; brother of above, enginesmith, played oboe with M.I. Choral & Orchestral Union, noted enthusiast for radical Liberal politics and stalwart Wesleyan Methodist, sometime M.I.C., died circa 1910; 26

**TELFORD**, Thomas; 1757-1834, famous road and bridge engineer, patron of literature, poet, founder of the Institute of Civil Engineers; 2, 34

**TONGE**, Frederick; railway clerk, husband of Swindon councillor, Labour Member of Parliament for a west London constituency for a number of years post W.W.2; 27

**TOPHAM**, Prank; born Liverpool 1832, confidential clerk to M.C.Rea 1850-7; Secretary M.I. similar period, first secretary New Swindon Improvement Company 1853-8, subsequent career unknown; 14

**TREHERNE**, Dr. John; born Victoria Road, Swindon c. 1928/9, related to family of William Morris (founder of *Swindon Advertiser*), educated Euclid Street Secondary School and Headlands School, subsequent distinguished academic career at Downing College, Cambridge, author of a number of works; 30

**TRIMMER**, Charles; born Guildford, Surrey, 1816, died circa 1870, railway inspector (traffic department) G.W.R., resident New Swindon by 1843, M.I.C., prominent in Wesleyan Methodist circles, 30

**WALTERS**, Mr. Councillor Sam; S.B.C., contested Bristol constituency for Labour Party soon after W.W.1, long connections with M.F.S., sometime Mayor of Swindon, died 1940; 27

**WATSON**, David; native of Aberdeen, walked to New Swindon c. 1846 to find work, stalwart of Amalgamated Society of Engineers, local radical politics, co-operative movement, M.F., and M.F.S., sometime M.I.C.; 23, 27

**WEARING**, William Brewer; native of Trowbridge, Wilts., bank manager at Old Town, stalwart of Baptist Church, strong supporter of M.I. and local Liberal associations, died at Cirencester, at great age, circa 1909/10; 14

**WESLEY**, Revd. Charles; 1707-91; prolific English hymn-writer, brother of Revd. John Wesley; 34

**WHITWORTH**, Sir Joseph; 1803-87, leading English engineer, co-founder of firm Armstrong-Whitworth; 4

**WILLIAMS**, Alfred; born 1877 at South Marston, Wilts., died 1930, began life as farm labourer but joined G.W.R. to become hammer-man at age of 15, walked daily to and from South Marston, self-taught scholar, several collections of poems and folk-songs etc., published *Life in a Railway Factory* in 1915; 30

**WORDSWORTH**, William; 1770-1850, English poet, was poet laureate 1843-50; 2

**WRIGHT**, Major F. G.; Vice-President M.I.; member S.B.C., very prominent in local affairs 1900-30; 27

**WYON**, Edward; noted English sculptor, mid 19th C; 28

PLEASE NOTE: The brief notes relating to various people listed in this Index should not interpreted as meaning that the few facts mentioned were all that they achieved; or that they and they alone were responsible for efforts attributed to them. Tens of thousands were involved in the Mechanics' Institute and in the achievements of its members in many spheres of activity. Most of the names quoted were taken at random as examples of many who merited recognition for their self-sacrifice, work and initiative.

#### ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS INDEX

A.E.U.	<i>Amalgamated Engineering Union</i>
G.W.R.	<i>Great Western Railway, 1835-1947</i>
L.M.S.R.	<i>London, Midland &amp; Scottish Railway, 1923-47</i>
L.N.E.R.	<i>London, North Eastern Railway, 1923-47</i>
M.F.	<i>(New Swindon) Medical Fund, 1847-59</i>
M.F.S.	<i>(New) Swindon G.W.R. Medical Fund Society, 1859-1948</i>
M.I.	<i>Mechanics' Institution as New Swindon/New Swindon G.W.R./Swindon G.W.R./Swindon British Railways (Western Region) Mechanics' Institution (the official title being subject to various changes over the years)</i>
M.I.C.	<i>Member of Institution Council</i>
P.C.C.	<i>Parochial Church Council</i>
R.C.A.	<i>Railway Clerks' Association</i>
S.B.C.	<i>Swindon Borough Council</i>
S.F.S.	<i>(New) Swindon (G.W.R./B.R.) Sick Fund Society, frequently referred to as "The Yard Club", Reg'd Society No. 743F, 1843-1986</i>
W.C.C.	<i>Wiltshire County Council</i>
W.W.1	<i>First World War, 1914-18</i>
W.W.2	<i>Second World War, 1939-45</i>
19 <sup>th</sup> C	<i>Nineteenth Century</i>