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Magazine**
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for **everyone**

Theatres
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Bringing Swindon's culture home



Theatres Trust Conference 17:

Theatres & Placemaking

17 October | Lyric Hammersmith

In advance of the Theatres Trust Conference on Theatres and Placemaking, Daniel Rose, Executive Director of the Swindon Mechanics' Institution Trust, and also speaker at the conference, reminds us that the idea of culture and placemaking is not new. He argues that it's time to revive nineteenth century community movements banding together to address mutual social, health, learning and cultural needs in order to transform the places where communities live and work.

'A hive of community, culture, learning and creativity' – marketing hyperbole straight from the latest regeneration project? Or the merits of a social, cultural and educational masterpiece of nineteenth century forward thinking?

It's the latter of course, because 175 years ago, the highly innovative and far-reaching work of Swindon's Mechanics' Institution was changing lives and expectations in a fast-changing and expanding town.

The Great Western Railway (GWR) arrived in 1842 to establish a new railway works, a site chosen by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Daniel Gooch. New Swindon was born. This was a site at the base of a hill several miles from the small market settlement of Swindon, an agricultural place little changed for hundreds of years. The Railway Works were built in an area with no houses, schools, recreational facilities, shops or a market within easy reach, and against many odds in these muddy fields emerged a thriving place known for its engineering success and skilled workforce. Less is known about the social and cultural story that developed in the neighbouring Railway Village.

The GWR provided jobs and built the houses but the majority of the not insignificant needs and growing pains of New Swindon fell to the workers themselves to resolve – a relevant reminder for many towns and cities today that a job and a house does not in itself make a viable and successful community. Even before the Institution built its premises in 1854, the organisation was rising to the social, health, learning and cultural needs of the day.

Among the many aspects of this imposing building was the impressive theatre that formed the heart and soul of the town. It cannot be



stated too often that for a provincial town in the post-Victorian era there was both variety and range in the productions seen by the residents of Swindon. Swindon workers made up the cast of many productions and in turn toured the GWR network from London to the West Country.

The Mechanics' was the epicentre of New Swindon life, so popular and successful that further buildings and organisations were formed around it, including a host of theatrical and performance based bodies, some still in existence today.

The Institution continued to evolve and grow until faced with gradual decline from the 1960s including the end of the theatre in 1976 with the creation by the Council of the modern Wyvern Theatre. By 1986 with the closure of the Railway Works the Mechanics' found itself closed and a botched attempt by the local authority to take on the building gave way to a series of ill-conceived schemes by private speculators resulting in eventual dereliction.

Formed in 1995, The Mechanics' Institution Trust operates in a dual role – both as a building preservation trust and community development social enterprise. In many ways we were ahead of our time by combining what is commonly referred to now as 'people and place', however our inspiration for this approach comes from the past. In its heyday the Mechanics' Institution was about far more than just a building. Its reach and connection into the community was extensive. Contrary to popular mythology, the Institution was not set up by Brunel, nor was it by virtue of paternal benevolence from the

Institution Band, 1900

STEAM, Museum of the Great Western Railway

Great Western Railway. The workers themselves built and managed the building. They were a membership body with each workshop electing a representative to sit on the Management Committee with a strictly non-partisan and non-denominational approach.

Our Trust reflects this original role today, we too are a membership body having recruited several thousand members over the years. We continue to take on properties surrounding the Mechanics' such as a preserved railway workers house as an independent museum, a community facility in the former hospital and one of the corner pubs which will become a café for the community later this year. But we don't just care about bricks and mortar for their historical value, we also see their potential for transforming how local people feel about their place. And we aim to bring about regeneration through community enterprise rather than these buildings simply being seen for their narrow economic value, for private control and profit. Our extensive programme of community development places us at the heart of the neighbourhood, a valued part of people's lives running and facilitating everything from a community cinema to a youth club, community gardening schemes to toddler groups - we try to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the community adapting our priorities over time.

Of course we face numerous challenges - resources, becoming financially sustainable and the danger of overstretching our voluntary capacity. However at the top of the list of challenges sits the role of local government.

When the Mechanics' was first created the vast tentacles of the local council simply didn't exist. Few could argue against the importance and need for public services and the welfare state post-war. However there have been consequences to the broader growth and influence of the public sector which until recently controlled the majority of leisure, recreation, cultural and community activities and assets.

Previously these matters weren't services in the sense of provider and rate payer but community organisations, clubs and societies - the role of the user was often also a member and to differing extents mutually cooperative and jointly accountable. The culture of hyper local mutual cooperation has arguably been diminished and

with it the skill of 'making it work' forgotten. Before the major challenges to local government finances in the last few years we had already started to see the rise in commercial involvement in leisure and even local green spaces - in this instance the role has become corporation to customer. But all around us we see another approach emerging, or actually re-emerging - that of community control, management and enterprise, perhaps most noticeable first in the rise of community pubs and post offices. As localists we relish the opportunity to take back control but this needs to be enabled by a local government that wants to do it because it sees it as the right thing to do to strengthen and empower communities and not simply because at best 'we can't afford it anymore,' or at worst when community influence is met with a degree of suspicion and attempt at taking power or credit from the local 'authority'.

Our central mission to regenerate the Mechanics' Institution as a place and as a way of doing things continues. The ethos of the original organisation has once again become highly relevant to our lives. The Mechanics' Institution as both an organisation and a building understood the social and cultural challenges of the day and sought to solve them, with lasting, innovative success.

Public services will continue to shrink and with a host of social and economic challenges for our society the role of places like the Mechanics' as a hive of social, community and cultural enlightenment is once again crucial.

The Mechanics' Institution of the twenty-first century should enrich a town by fostering a place for collaborative thinking, the sharing of ideas, and action. Most importantly it will be a place that the community truly own and control once again - called an Institution, but never institutional in culture.

The Mechanics' Institution is currently under the jurisdiction of the Crown Estate, following the dissolution of the last private owner. The Council undertook urgent works in 2010 totalling nearly £1m. Our Trust recently completed a successful refreshed high-level viability report to investigate the creation of a mixed-use community and cultural venue, complete with restored theatre.

With stakeholder support positive we plan to embark on a full, detailed, viability study and business plan in the Autumn with a view to a Heritage Lottery application thereafter.

You can hear more from Daniel Rose and the Trust's plans to restore the Mechanics' Institution at Conference 17: Theatres & Placemaking on 17 October 2017.

Book your place by visiting:
theatretrust.org.uk/latest/events/232-theatres-trust-conference-17-theatres-placemaking



A group of local gardening volunteers called 'Incredible Edible' working at the Railway Village Community Centre, run by the Swindon Mechanics' Institution Trust.