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**Self-help and the London Mechanics' Institution —  
Birkbeck after (George) Birkbeck**

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# *Self Help:*

## **Mechanics' Worldwide Conference 2009**

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at  
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SELF-HELP AND THE LONDON MECHANICS' INSTITUTION —  
BIRKBECK AFTER (GEORGE) BIRKBECK

28 SEPTEMBER 2009

### Abstract

The London Mechanics' Institution is notable not only for its influence on similar bodies elsewhere, but for the contention which surrounded its formation in 1823. The story of the eclipse of its initiators Thomas Hodgskin and Joseph Clinton Robertson by the liberal modernisers Brougham, Place and others is reasonably well known. Well before George Birkbeck's own death in 1841 the battle for 'popular control' had largely been lost (although it continued to surface in different forms for the next century). 'Useful knowledge', pioneered in Birkbeck's own early lectures in Glasgow, promoted widely in the *Mechanics' Magazine*, and elevated to a social movement in Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, had become almost hegemonic and was manifest in its most systematic form in William Ellis' Birkbeck Schools, launched in the summer of 1848 (not without opposition) in the lecture theatre of the Institution.

In 1851 a 'third Birkbeck' appeared (in addition to the Institution and the Schools) whose history to date has received little attention. By the 1850s, 'penny savings banks' had been set up in a number of Mechanics' Institutes, however the 'Birkbeck Bank' was very different. Effectively an ultra vires umbrella for the Birkbeck Building Society and the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society, it became a significant constituent of the English property based financial system. Until at least 1885, it had a close relationship with the London Mechanics' Institution, sharing more than the name of George Birkbeck. It occupied joint premises, had overlapping governance and the Bank's monies sustained the College at critical times of financial crisis. It also reflected an ideology of progressive philanthropic liberalism that was at times hotly contested by the radical champions of the social classes that both Institution and Bank had been initially formed to assist. Just as the Mechanics' Institution was attacked from its foundation for having betrayed the ideals of its radical originators, the Birkbeck Building

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SELF-HELP AND THE LONDON MECHANICS' INSTITUTION — BIRKBECK AFTER (GEORGE) BIRKBECK

Society was attacked by Frederick Engels' in *The Housing Question* (1872) for being irrelevant to the improvement of living conditions for the urban poor.

The educational endeavours of Birkbeck's Mechanics' Institution and the financial enterprise of the Birkbeck Bank reflected parallel motivations and concealed comparable tensions. The Mechanics' Institution embodied two distinct and contending visions of the role of working-class education within alternative political programmes of social change and political emancipation, versus individual betterment and self-realisation. The Birkbeck Bank's initial vision of property ownership as a means of extending the franchise in order to change society gave way to one of financial prudence and owner-occupation as a route to social stability through personal fulfilment. In these conflicts between radicalism and liberal reform, the latter was, perhaps inevitably, ascendant.

The physical apotheosis of the Birkbeck Bank was its extraordinary edifice erected between 1885 and 1902 on the site of the old Mechanics' Institution. This architectural 'phantasmagoria' of the Birkbeck buildings (described as 'a sort of pictorial Samuel Smiles') became a major commercial centre; its dome was bigger than that of the Bank of England and adorned, like the Bank's façade with symbolic bees 'B's and busts (including one of Birkbeck himself) signifying industry, foresight and knowledge — an iconographic paean to nineteenth century self-help. The building was replaced in 1962 with the modernist headquarters of the Westminster Bank (which had taken over the assets of the Birkbeck on its collapse in 1911) and what remains of 'The Birkbeck' (including its archives) now belongs to the Royal Bank of Scotland.

The complex and problematic ideology of self-help lives on however (not least in the changing educational provision of Birkbeck College) and its nineteenth-century physical residue can be seen in the Birkbeck roads, mews, ways, places and gardens — and schools — which still feature in the landscape of London. Header of the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society First Annual Report for 1853 (by kind permission of Royal Bank of Scotland)

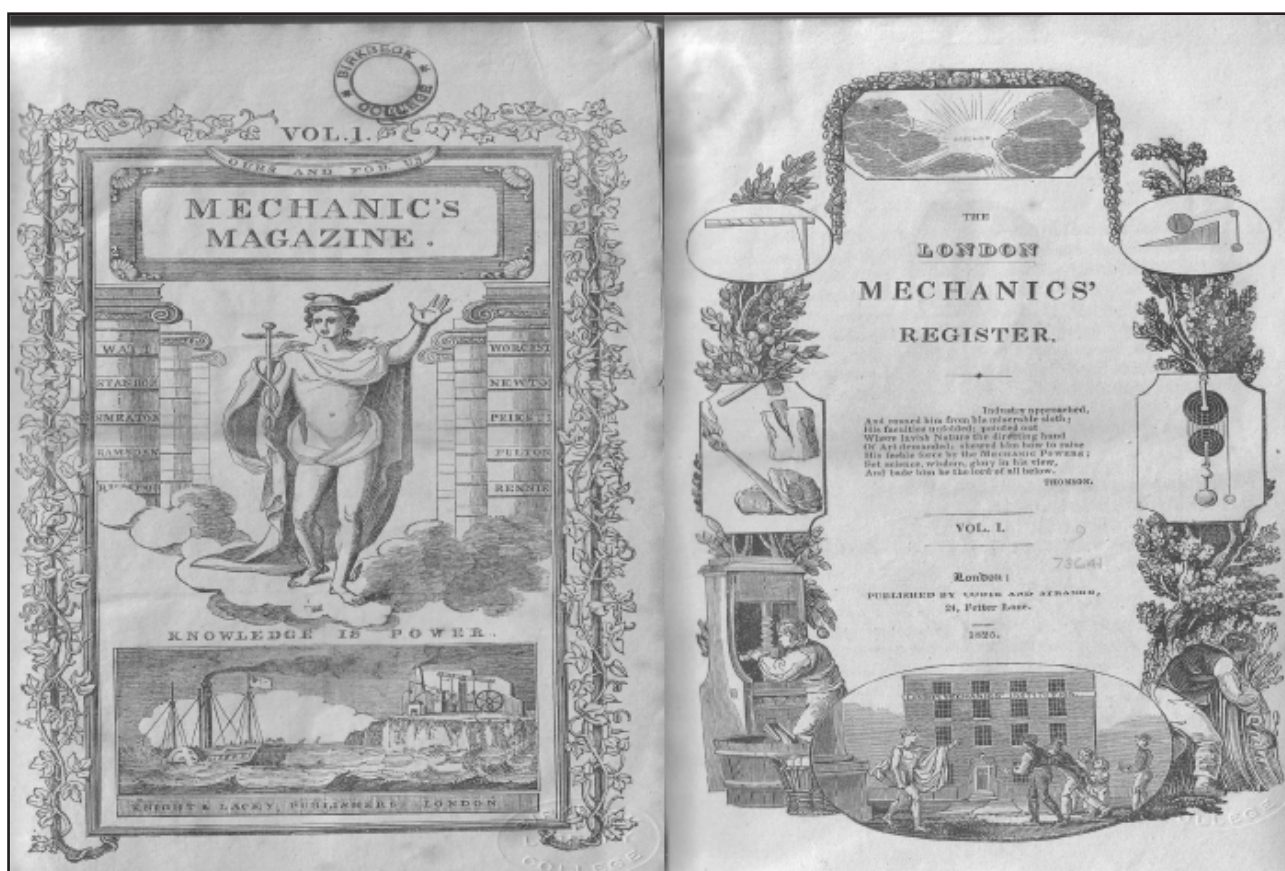
## Introduction

The London Mechanics' Institution (LMI), founded in 1823, was not the first such Institution, but by general consent it was the most important. It was<sup>1, 2: p 17</sup> and is<sup>3</sup> recognised as the model for a movement which spread rapidly, not just in Britain, but elsewhere, particularly in Australia and North America. The Institutional history of the LMI and of the subsequent growth of Mechanics' Institutions and associated bodies is relatively well known. However its links with other nineteenth century initiatives in educational reform, and with broader movements for social improvement have been little researched.

This paper explores the relations between the London Mechanics' Institution the Birkbeck Schools (launched in the LMI's Lecture Theatre in 1848) and the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society, Building Society (BLBS) and Bank which between 1851 and 1885 shared the Institution's premises and, arguably, saved it from extinction). I argue that all three 'Birkbecks' — the Institution, the Schools and the Bank — were the manifestation of a particular version of 'useful knowledge' and 'self-help' which was hotly contested.

## Birkbeck beginnings

Disputes over control of the Institution and over its constituency and its curriculum dogged it from the start. Initially these crystallised around the need for — and funding of — a building. The initial proposal for what subsequently became Birkbeck College was contained in a handbill, printed in the *Mechanics' Magazine* on 11 October 1823 by Joseph Clinton Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin (who had launched the *Magazine* in the August of that year). This appealed to the 'mechanics' of London to form an Institution along the lines of that recently established in Glasgow by students who had seceded from Anderson's Institution (established in 1796 for the education of the 'unacademic classes' and where George Birkbeck taught from 1799 until 1804, when he moved to London) following disputes over control. Hodgskin in particular was well known as a radical activist whose economic theory became an important precursor of Marxism. The principal mission of the LMI — penned by Hodgskin — was to make working men 'acquainted with the facts of chemistry and of mechanical philosophy and of the creation and distribution of wealth'<sup>4</sup>. Those interested were asked to write to the *Magazine's* publishers.



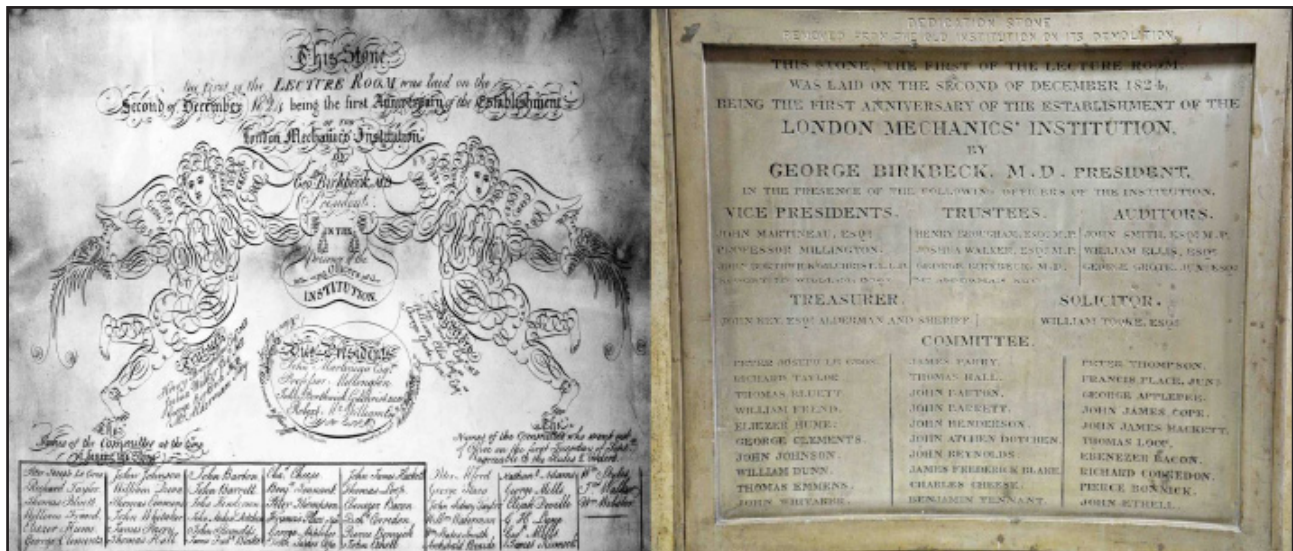
*The impetus for the founding of the London Mechanics' Institution came from a call by Thomas Hodgskin and J C Robertson in their newly-launched Mechanics' Magazine. Its title page (left) carried the maxims 'Ours and for Us' and 'Knowledge is Power'. Following the triumph of the Benthamites, the LMI Committee launched its own competing journal, the London Mechanics' Register (right). Featuring a portrait of George Birkbeck on its frontispiece, its title page (and contents) promulgated a rather different message of self-help. 'Science' (shown as an illuminating, even heavenly, force) rather than 'power' was the driver of progress; 'mechanics' (shown at the bottom flocking to the newly built premises of the LMI) could participate rather than control.*



Amongst the many responses received were offers of help from George Birkbeck, Henry Brougham and Francis Place. William Cobbett gave £5 and Robert Owen, also very much on the left, gave £10 but so did William Wilberforce despite his opposition to any education for artisans which left them ‘ignorant of the grounds on which we rest the Divine Authority of Christianity’<sup>5: p 14</sup> and Cobbett expressed concern that the project would be appropriated by those who were not ‘real mechanics’ and that those who were would be ‘humbugged’ as a result<sup>quoted in 6: p 257</sup>. Lord Byron promised £50. Sir Francis Burdett, MP for Westminster, donated an impressive 1,000 guineas. Major engineering employers, aware of the need for a more skilled workforce, chipped in, as did the City breweries, Whitbreads and Truman Hanbury, with 50 guineas each ‘though probably more with the mechanics’ brand loyalty than their political convictions in mind’<sup>5: p 14</sup>.

The LMI was established in December 1823 following a series of meetings attended by as many as 2,000 people. For some months after its foundation, the new Institution had no home. Temporary offices were established at Furnival’s Inn. Popular lectures and classes on arithmetic, language and music held at the Monkwell Street Chapel and at the houses of members. Eventually, in 1824 suitable premises were found at 29, Southampton Buildings (in Chancery Lane, Holborn) with adjacent land which could be built on. Hodgskin and Robertson objected to the leasing of expensive premises on the grounds that the Institution would be dependant on the rich, who alone could provide the necessary funds. They argued that the Glasgow Institute had managed to remain independent of wealthy benefactors. In the end ‘money talked’<sup>3: p 121</sup>. Hodgskin and Robertson lacked influence and patronage; George Birkbeck was able to provide and secure it. Pragmatism won over principle. Robertson, Hodgskin and others who had initially put forward the initiative for the Institution were defeated. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, the current President of Birkbeck College: ‘The Benthamite Radicals in London founded (or rather, ‘took over and diverted’) the London Mechanics’ Institution’<sup>7</sup>; ‘The original founders were pushed aside’<sup>5: p 14</sup>. Control ‘passed to the middle-class supporters whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus’<sup>8: p 818</sup>. On 2 December 1824 the foundation stone for a new lecture theatre was laid at Southampton Buildings; this opened in July the following year. Robertson refused to attend, declaring in the *Mechanics’ Magazine* that ‘the Committee of Management is an illegal usurpation, elected contrary to the laws, and acting in defiance of them’; of the members of the new Institution ‘certainly not more than *one half* are of that class of persons for whose special benefit the Institution was founded’ and the foundation stone to be laid would be ‘but the foundation of a load of debt’. ‘The Institution, in short, has become a Mechanics’ Institution only in name’<sup>9: pp vi-viii</sup>.

Robertson severed all links with the LMI but continued to criticise it from the pages of the *Mechanics’ Magazine*. Hodgskin however, with the support of George Birkbeck, continued to lecture there. His first lectures — published as *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* contain a manifesto for education as the stimulus for social change: ‘...As the labourers acquire knowledge, the foundations of the social edifice will be dug up from the deep beds into which they were laid in times past, they will be curiously handled and closely examined, and they will not be restored unless they were originally laid in justice, and unless justice commands their preservation’<sup>10</sup>. Hodgskin’s views were in sharp contrast to those of Henry Brougham who published them the same year in manifesto form in his *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People*<sup>11</sup> and put them into practice through his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). Hodgskin’s second lecture series, published as *Popular Political Economy*<sup>12</sup> was extremely widely read, and was quoted extensively by Marx who used it as the basis for his labour theory of value, calling Hodgskin ‘one of the most important modern English economists’<sup>13: p 1000</sup>.



*The initial design (above) for the foundation stone of the London Mechanics' Institution (1824) hints at the conflicts surrounding its formation. The names of the committee at the time of laying the stone are listed, together with those of the 'outgoing committee agreeable to its Rules and Orders'. The elaborate design would have been quite impossible to execute, but what is interesting the stone itself (below, presently installed in the Foyer of Birkbeck College's Malet Street building) is that there is no hint of these discords. In both design and as executed, the names of Brougham, Place and other Benthamite radicals feature prominently along with that of George Birkbeck; but there is no mention of the LMI's initiators, Hodgskin and Robertson.*

George Birkbeck, the disputed founder and first President of the LMI died in 1841 and his death left the Institution with a legacy of debt. To the capital on his loan (most of which related the LMI's premises) was added the accrued interest — a point not lost on the editor of the *Mechanics' Magazine* who pointed out that the interest was significantly higher than the money would have received if in a bank. The character of the Institution had also changed. As Birkbeck's own biographer put it, well before Birkbeck's death the LMI had fallen largely 'under the control of the moneyed classes'<sup>14</sup>: p 88 and had become a prop of orthodoxy and respectability instead of an independent working class organisation. A letter to George Birkbeck in 1839 complained that 'two thirds of the members consist not of mechanics but of a different class of men, viz merchants and attorney's clerks etc'<sup>15</sup>: p 56. By mid-century, the battle for 'popular control' had largely been lost (although it continued to surface in different forms for the next century). The LMI like other similar organisations, had 'but few of the labouring classes enrolled in their books'<sup>1</sup>: p 212 and was appealing to a largely middle-class audience. 'Useful knowledge', pioneered in Birkbeck's own early lectures in Glasgow and promoted widely through the Mechanics' Institutes and through Brougham's SDUK, had become a significant social movement, articulated most clearly in Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859) and in the flood of similar titles (Smiles' own were *Character* (1871), *Thrift* (1875) and *Duty* (1880)) that followed, and underlying the construction of 'Victorian' values.

## Birkbeck Schools

As a coherent educational programme, ‘useful knowledge’ was manifest in its most systematic form in William Ellis’ Birkbeck Schools, launched (in the teeth of opposition) in the summer of 1848 in the LMI’s lecture theatre. Some twenty-five years younger than Birkbeck, Ellis had also responded to the appeal in the *Mechanics’ Magazine*. Rapidly accepted into the circles of Birkbeck, Brougham and Mill; Ellis became one of the most prominent of the educationally committed, philanthropically minded ‘improvers’. After several articles in the *Westminster Review* — on slavery, on charity, on machinery, and, (with J S Mill with whom he became a personal friend as well as an associate in the Utilitarian Society and other groups) on political economy, Ellis’ first separate publication appeared in 1829, under the title *Conversations upon Knowledge Happiness, and Education between a Mechanic and a Patron of the London Mechanics’ Institution*<sup>16</sup>. *Conversations* not only contains an early statement of Ellis’ political views but also presents a practical anticipation of his educational method, later to find expression in the Birkbeck Schools. During the three ‘conversations’ (upon the topics in the title) the ‘mechanic’ ‘now developing more intelligence in the gradual progress of the instructive discussion’<sup>17: p 47</sup> asks (in a reverse way to Ellis’ later educational method, where it is the teacher who leads the enquiry) ever more testing questions of his mentor.

From the start it appears that there had been attempts to set up schools within the LMI but unsuccessfully. An SDUK *Manual for Mechanics and their Institutions* declared that ‘Schools were originally attached to the London Mechanics’ Institution; they have, however, been given up’<sup>18: p 133</sup>. Despite his interest in the LMI, Ellis’ first enthusiasm was children; he ‘saw what a difficult and, in many cases, hopeless task it was to re-form the characters of those who had grown up to adult age in ignorance, and in whom habits of indolence, intemperance, and thriftlessness were fixed and established, and that the only method of doing permanent good was to seek to form character during childhood, when the mind is plastic and impressionable’<sup>17: pp Preface, viii</sup>. In 1846 Ellis published his *Outlines of Social Economy*<sup>19</sup>. The following year a pamphlet circulated under the names of W Mattieu Williams and Richard Taylor, respectively the LMI’s secretary and treasurer, announcing Ellis’ (anonymous) ‘offer of one thousand pounds sterling toward establishing a school, to be called the Birkbeck School, on the premises of the London Mechanics’ Institution, in which, besides the principles of the natural sciences, the principles of social well-being, or of social and political economy, should be regularly taught’<sup>20</sup>. If Ellis’ teaching methods were radical, so was the curriculum, but Ellis’ ‘social economy’ was very different from the ‘political economy’ of Thomas Hodgskin. For Hodgskin, the consequences of education would be ‘a more extensive change in the frame of society than has ever yet been made’<sup>10</sup>. In Ellis’ Birkbeck Schools, by contrast, ‘useful knowledge’ would include not just the science of everyday things but also the ‘laws of social economy’ in order that students might ‘properly understand their own position in Society, and their duties towards it’<sup>20</sup> ‘leading the young to observe, examine, acknowledge and obey’ the ‘laws of industrial life’<sup>21: p 14</sup>. ‘[T]he Birkbeck system was, in essence, an education contrived to teach the poor their place’<sup>22: p 219</sup>.





*The Lecture Theatre of the LMI (left), location of the first Birkbeck School opened in 1848 by William Ellis. A number of other Birkbeck Schools followed, meeting first in temporary premises (such as chapels and also in other Mechanics' Institutions) but subsequently in purpose-built premises whose architect, T E Knightley (the Birkbeck Building and Land Society's surveyor) was later to design the extraordinary edifice of the Birkbeck Bank. The Birkbeck Schools were secular, often for girls as well as boys, emphasised teaching through dialogue, rejecting rote learning (as well as corporal punishment), and (more problematically) emphasised 'social economy' and 'useful knowledge' The sixth Birkbeck School opened in 1852 in Kingsland (top right, photographed in the 1880s) survives today as Colvestone Primary School (bottom right).*

Following the school opened in the LMI Lecture Theatre, Ellis himself established five further Birkbeck Schools in London between 1849 and 1852, in Finsbury, Westminster, Bethnal Green, Peckham, and Kingsland; he also lent support to a number of others, some of which bore Birkbeck's name, and at least two of which — in St John Street, Tottenham Court Road, and in Carlisle Street, Paddington, opened in the premises of Mechanics' Institutions. Outside London, in addition to Edinburgh, Ellis provided significant financial or other help to the establishment of schools (some also called Birkbeck Schools) in Glasgow, Leith, Manchester, Salford, Blandford (Dorset), King's Sambourne (Hampshire), Dunton Bassett (Leicestershire) and Hethersett (Norfolk).

Initially, (as with schools opened in Mechanics' Institutions) rooms or buildings were rented (many in old chapels) but later schools were specially built. Some schools lasted only a few years, but others were spectacularly successful. The Birkbeck School in Peckham, built in 1852 to accommodate 400 children was hugely oversubscribed and was enlarged four years later to accommodate over a thousand children. The Kingsland Schools, founded the same year in Colvestone Crescent, in December, 1852, (under the mastership of James Runtz, a brother of John Runtz whom Ellis had appointed to head the LMI schools) was like Peckham, built specially for the purpose upon leasehold land and converted into freehold some twenty years later. The last schools to be founded by William Ellis were in Gospel Oak in 1862 and bore his name (rather than that of George Birkbeck); Ellis' name remains today in the boy's school (in a new location and in new buildings)

### The Birkbeck Bank

The Birkbeck Schools were designed to train pupils 'in the various qualities which lie at the base of all social wellbeing — such as industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property, and forethought'<sup>17: pp 72-73</sup> and to submit to the laws of 'social economy' as a necessary condition of economic prosperity and of their own betterment<sup>22</sup>. 'Industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property, and forethought' needed vehicles for their expression and in 1851 a 'third Birkbeck' appeared (in addition to the Institution and the Schools) whose history to date has received even less attention than the schools.

Whilst Ellis had been involved with the LMI from its inception the LMI was well established by the time Francis Ravenscroft was born and was celebrating its quarter-century (and in financial crisis) when in 1848, aged nineteen, he enrolled as a student. He appears to have impressed with his exceptional business flair and astute financial acumen; in March the following year he was elected (probably through Ellis' agency) to the Institution's Committee of Management. The Committee's minutes of April 16 1849 (which record a major dispute over the Birkbeck Schools and the receipt of a requisition signed by 71 members of the Institution to call a public meeting on the issue) show Ravenscroft as being in the chair of the Committee itself; he remained a dominant figure in the Institution's life for over fifty years.

In 1851, on the death of his father, Francis Ravenscroft took over the family wig-making business (later to combine with the gown makers Ede to become Ede and Ravenscroft). In the same year, he founded the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society and shortly after, a sibling Birkbeck Building Society; by the late 1850s these were joined by a third entity, the Birkbeck Bank. The Birkbeck Land and Building Societies (BLBS) started by renting a cupboard in the LMI Secretary's office. The LMI's minutes for September 1853 record an agreement to allow the BLBS to erect its own signboard in the hall and in December to rent the whole office to Ravenscroft; by 1862 an illustration of the LMI suggests that the BLBS and Bank occupied the whole of the ground floor. Their success was such that by 1885 Ravenscroft was able to arrange for the LMI, whose name he changed to the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution (BLSI), to move to new purpose built premises in nearby Breams Buildings and the BLBS and Bank took over the whole of the Mechanics' Institution building.

The BLBS was formed 'to facilitate the acquisition of Freehold Land, and the erection of houses thereon, to enable such of its Members as are eligible to obtain the county franchise, and to afford all of them a secure and profitable investment for money'<sup>23</sup>. Beyond their function of helping members to purchase a house, early land and building societies also had an important political dimension, of entitling their owners to a parliamentary vote. In their initial phases

this had been a primary objective and in the years following the collapse of Chartism in 1848 'the freehold land movement came close to dominating popular politics'<sup>24: p 319</sup>. The BLBS was anxious however to distance itself from any taint of Chartism. Its 1855 *Prospectus* — published, like other materials, by the LMI — opens with a supposed 'from the Notes of our own Reporter.' 'The Stranger' hailing the Manager,

Good Morning, Mr Manager, can I have a few words with you?

Manager — Certainly, Sir, what is the object of your visit?

S. — Why, to tell you the truth, I was at a Public Meeting of your Land Society the other night, and when I came away, I began thinking that I used a good deal more tobacco, and drank a good deal more beer, than I actually needed; and as I was sitting in the Cat and Fiddle last night, I said I would give up that way of wasting money. Some of my mates began laughing at me, and telling me of Feargus O'Connor, and what a mess he made of it; so I thought as you seem an honest, straight-forward sort of man, I would just come and speak to you...

M.— Certainly it is true that these Societies, when they were originally started, had a political bearing; but they have now lost that altogether...Of course, a man desires to have a vote — it is quite right that he should do so — it is a natural object of a laudable ambition; but it is the pecuniary advantages on which I dwell...<sup>23: pp 3-4</sup>

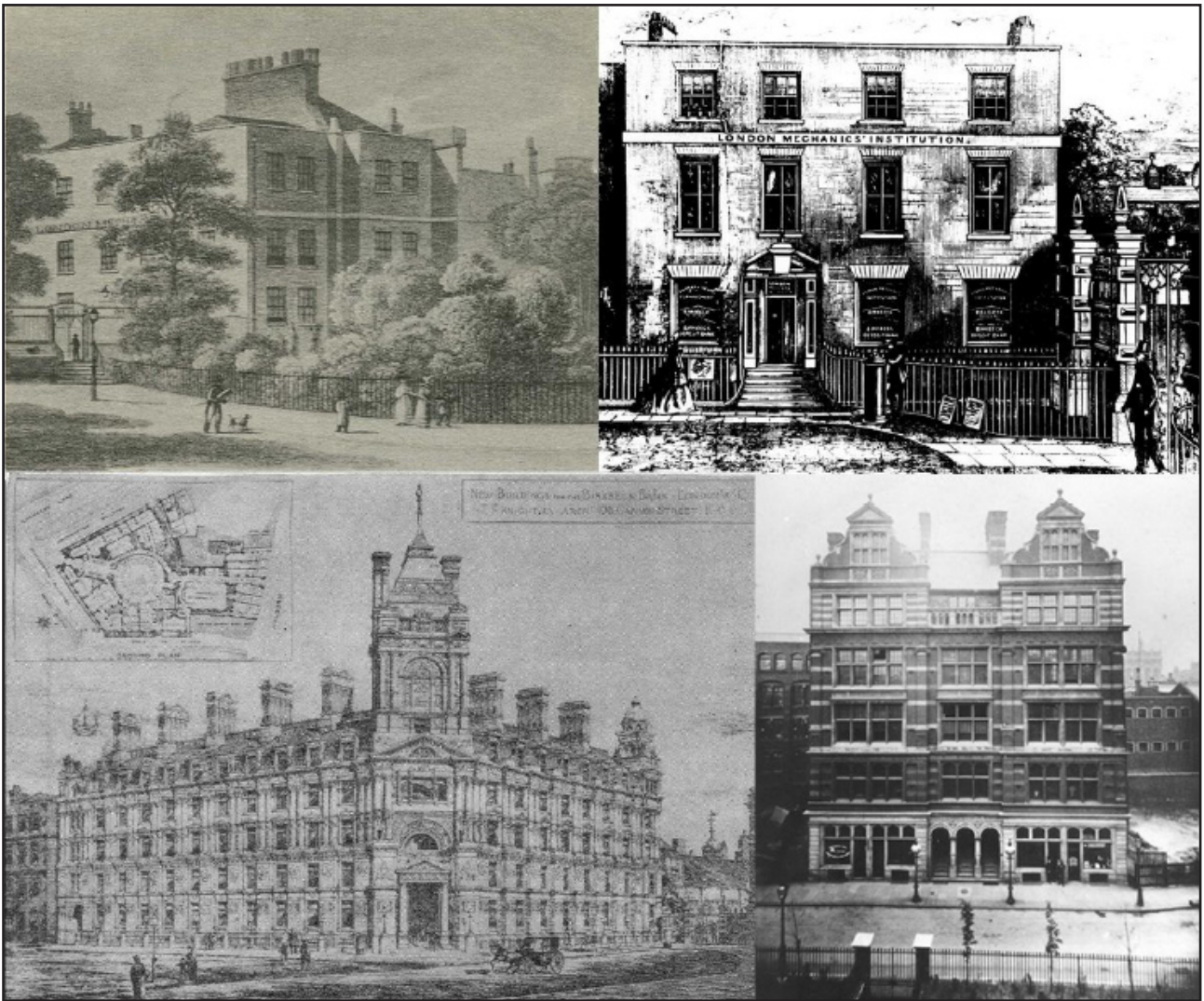
After an interchange, not dissimilar to one of William Ellis' 'conversations' between a Mechanic and an LMI Patron, 'Stranger' is eventually convinced; the interchange ends:

[The Manager takes the money, and enters it in due form in his book; while the visitor, with a smile of satisfaction on his face, goes home to tell his wife that he will soon have a vote, and that she will soon have a house of her own to live in.]<sup>23: p 24</sup>

### **'Three Birkbecks' and a funeral**

All the Birkbeck Schools suffered from the passing of the 1870 Education Act and the establishment of Board schools (with monitored teaching standards, often in modern buildings and funded from public sources) in their neighbourhoods. Some collapsed. Attendance at the Bethnal Green School, for example, fell from 400 in 1870 to 140 in 1879 and it finally closed and the premises were sold, in 1886. The first Mechanics' Institution Boys' School was finally closed in 1873 after the London School Board rated the school 'inefficient' when it found the premises — still the Mechanics' Institution lecture room gallery — to be inadequate. Others continued to thrive, but their character changed. The Kingsland Schools, built initially for only some three hundred children, had expanded by 1889 to accommodate between five hundred and six hundred. However '[t]hey were originally, like the others, adapted for artisans... but in consequence of the Education Act and the foundation of Board Schools in their neighbourhood the fee has been increased, and they are now middle class schools charging £1 1s per quarter.' Its premises, which today remain nearly intact as Colvestone Primary School, reflect in their architecture some of the most progressive elements of Ellis' philosophy and contrast strongly with other, later Board schools in the area. The Gospel Oak School also survived but '[a]s in the other schools, an increase in the fees charged was made, and the range of subjects taught somewhat extended so as to seek for pupils from a somewhat higher stratum of society than was contemplated in their inception'<sup>17: p 111</sup>; it became a 'direct-grant' Grammar School under the 1944 Education Act, survives today as a sought-after comprehensive and Birkbeck College, as successor to the old LMI, still appoints a governor.





Contemporary engravings of the London Mechanics' Institution shortly after completion in 1824 (top left) and in 1865 (top right). In the latter the lettering on the glass of the ground floor windows makes interesting reading. At the top of the two right hand windows can be read 'London Mechanics' Institution' but on the left hand window this is replaced by 'Birkbeck School founded [undecipherable]'. Inscribed on the lower part of all three windows, can be seen, first 'Birkbeck Building and Freehold Land Society' and underneath this, 'Birkbeck Deposit Bank'. The Birkbeck Building and Land Societies started by renting a cupboard in the Secretary's office but by 1885 had grown to take over the whole building. The LMI, renamed the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution, moved to new premises in Bream's Buildings (bottom right) funded by the Bank. In 1895, the LMI's premises were pulled down and replaced by the 'phantasmagoria' of Birkbeck Bank Chambers (bottom left).



The rise and fall of the Birkbeck Bank was more spectacular. By the 1850s, 'penny savings banks' had been set up in a number of Mechanics' Institutes. *The Working Man's Friend* declared in 1853 that 'Savings banks make HAPPY HOMES. . . savings' banks attached to Mechanics' Institutions would hold out a constant encouragement to the exercise of providence...the steady worker saves — saves that he may attain Self-respect, True Independence, and Political Equality'<sup>25</sup>. None, however, achieved the prominence of the Birkbeck Bank which succeeded perhaps precisely because its ambitions were as much commercial as ideological. An *ultra vires* umbrella for the Birkbeck Building Society and the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society, it had by the 1870s grown to become a significant constituent of the English property based financial system, the bank of choice for small savers.

If Marx was admiring of the theoretical work of the LMI's founder, Hodgskin, Frederick Engels was damning of its offspring, the BLBS. Just as the Mechanics' Institution was attacked from its foundation for having betrayed the ideals of its radical originators, the BLBS was used as a case study by Frederick Engels in *The Housing Question* (1872) his attack on those who saw building societies as a solution to the problem of inadequate housing. After quoting at length from advertisements for the BLBS Engels declares that although 'sometimes formed under political or philanthropic pretexts, but in the end their chief aim is always to provide a more profitable mortgage investment for the savings of the *petty bourgeoisie*, at a good rate of interest and the prospect of dividends from speculation in real estate'<sup>26: pp 58-60</sup>. By 1885 the BLBS and Bank had and its (by now subsidiary) Land and Building Societies played a significant role in developing what were then the suburban fringes of London.

The physical apotheosis of the Birkbeck Bank was its extraordinary edifice erected between 1885 and 1902 on the site of the old Mechanics' Institution. This architectural 'phantasmagoria' of the Birkbeck buildings ('a sort of pictorial Samuel Smiles') was built as a major commercial centre; its dome was bigger than that of the Bank of England and adorned, like the Bank's façade with symbolic bees 'B's and busts (including one of Birkbeck himself) signifying industry, foresight and knowledge — an iconographic paean to nineteenth century self-help. The Birkbeck Bank itself collapsed in 1911 and was taken over by the London and Westminster who replaced Knightley's extravaganza with the present modernist structure in 1962; what remains of 'The Birkbeck' now resides in the archives of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

### **'Self-Help' and social change**

The educational endeavours of Birkbeck's Mechanics' Institution, of Ellis' Birkbeck Schools and the financial enterprise of Ravenscroft's Birkbeck Bank reflected parallel agendas and embodied comparable tensions. At their heart were differing interpretations of the meaning of 'self-help' which varied from 'mutual improvement' through social change to personal fulfilment through individual advancement. In the LMI these were embodied in two distinct and contending visions of the role of working-class education — on the one hand political emancipation and social transformation, on the other individual betterment and a strengthening of the existing social order.

Whilst within the LMI these two visions remained contested (as they do in the LMI's successor today), the Birkbeck Schools and the BLBS and Bank clearly supported the latter agenda. That they should have their origins in the LMI was more than coincidental. The establishment of the first Birkbeck School in the LMI satisfied a 'long felt' desire to 'render complete the London Mechanics' Institution as an educational Institution by connecting with it, a School to which the members and their friends might send their children'<sup>20</sup>. Their rapid spread in some ways parallels that of the Mechanics' Institutions themselves a quarter century before. The relationship between the LMI and the Birkbeck



*First Annual Report and notice of the Annual Meeting of the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society formed at the LMI in 1851 (left). The Birkbeck Land and Building Societies' early material features many of the 'self help' elements of the early terminating societies including ownership of land and property (allocated to shareholders by ballot) as a route to the franchise but they took pains to distance themselves from the very different 'self-help' of the Chartist land societies, emphasising personal fulfilment as a route to social progress through thrift and sobriety. By the mid 1860s they had developed into a bank, first taking over the LMI's building and in 1885, replacing it with the 'phantasmagoria' of the Birkbeck Bank. The Bank, its dome, bigger than the Bank of England, featured scenes of industry and commerce, described by a commentator on its demolition in 1962 (right) as 'a sort of pictorial Samuel Smiles'.*

Bank was even closer — and longer lived. Until at least 1885, they occupied joint premises, had overlapping governance and the Bank's monies sustained the College at critical times of financial crisis. The three Birkbecks — the Institution, the Schools and the Bank — reflected an ideology of progressive philanthropic liberalism that was at times hotly contested by the radical champions of the social classes that they had been initially formed to assist.

Mechanics' Institutes worldwide have diverse origins and a varied history. For the London Institution, the Birkbeck School offered education for its members' children; the BLBS and Bank offered a home for their savings, the prospect of home ownership and access to the franchise, and their rental income kept the LMI solvent. It would be good to know more about the links of other Mechanics' Institutions with other educational endeavours, especially for children, and with wider initiatives including finance and real estate, and with contemporary debates around the relation between self-fulfilment and social progress. Meanwhile in the case of the LMI the complex and problematic ideology of self-help lives on (not least in the changing educational provision of Birkbeck College) and its nineteenth-century physical residue can be seen in the Birkbeck roads, mews, ways, places and gardens, a railway station — and schools — which still feature in the landscape of London.

## Endnotes

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