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Birkbeck places: landscapes of learning?

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Birkbeck Places – Landscapes of Learning?

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Summary

This paper explores the mutuality between the London Mechanics' Institute (founded in 1823 and the fore-runner of Birkbeck College), the Birkbeck Schools (launched in the Institute's Lecture Theatre in 1848) and the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society, Building Society and Bank (which between 1851 and 1885 shared the Institute's premises and, arguably, saved it from extinction). All three 'Birkbecks' — the college, the schools and the bank — arose as the material manifestation of a utilitarian world view intended to inculcate, and provide a vehicle for, the values of 'self-help' and they were hotly contested.

Disputes over control of the Mechanics' Institute (LMI), its constituency and its curriculum dogged it from the start. Initially these crystallised around the on the need for - and funding of - a building. The LMIs radical initiators argued that permanent premises would lead to control by wealthy patrons who would eventually determine what would be taught. The arguments continued for the next quarter-century and provided the context for the Birkbeck Schools — which formed the model for Dickens' 'Gradgrind Schools' — and of which seven were established in London.

The 1870 Education Act spelt the end for the London schools though the buildings of several survive and William Ellis' philosophy contributed to the character of the Board schools that succeeded them. The Bank, Land and Building Societies grew to become a major constituent (until their failure in 1911) of the English property based financial system. The focus of Engels' blistering critique in The Housing Question they played a significant part in the transformation of London's (sub)urban landscape, helping to frame the domestic lives of the same sections of the community for which the LMI (from 1866 renamed the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institute) and the Birkbeck Schools were catering.

The physical apotheosis of the Birkbeck Bank was its extraordinary edifice designed by the architect of the Birkbeck Schools, T E Knightley. Both schools and bank were conceived as 'instructional spaces' but whereas the design of the former reflected the progressive face of educational utilitarianism, Knightley's design for the bank was bizarre. Erected between 1885 and 1902 on the site of the old Mechanics' Institute, described by Pevsner as a 'phantasmagoria', and by the Architectural Review as 'the greatest single extravaganza of central London', Birkbeck Buildings was a major commercial centre. Its dome was bigger than that of the Bank of England and adorned, as was 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 took over the assets of the Birkbeck on its collapse); what remains of 'The Birkbeck'

(including its archives) now belongs to the Royal Bank of Scotland. The complex and problematic ideology of 'useful knowledge' lives on however. Its echoes can be found in the Birkbeck roads, mews, ways, places and gardens, a railway station, several pubs – and the surviving school buildings – which still feature in the landscape of London.

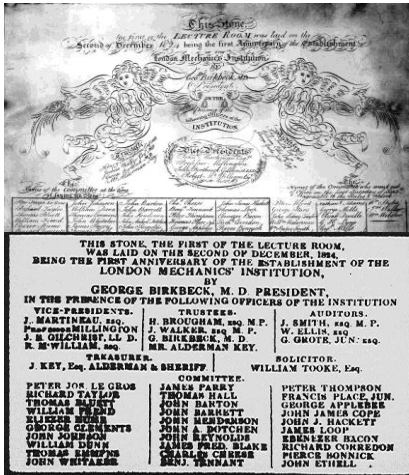


Figure i. The initial design for the LMI's foundation stone (1824) reflects the conflicts surrounding its formation. However there is no hint of these in the stone itself (presently in the Foyer of Birkbeck's Malet Street building) which features the names of Birkbeck, Brougham and Ellis but make no mention of the LMI's initiators, J C Robertson (editor of the *Mechanics' Magazine* in which the original proposal for an LMI was made) and Thomas Hodgskin (whose early lectures in the LMI, published as *Political Economy* formed the basis for Marx's theories of surplus value and are analysed at length in Vol IV of *Capital*).



Figure ii. The LMI circa 1865. The BLBS&B started by renting a cupboard in the Secretary's office and ended up by taking over the whole building. In this engraving the names of the Birkbeck Land and Building Society and of the Birkbeck Deposit Bank feature prominently below that of the Mechanics' Institution on all three ground floor windows.

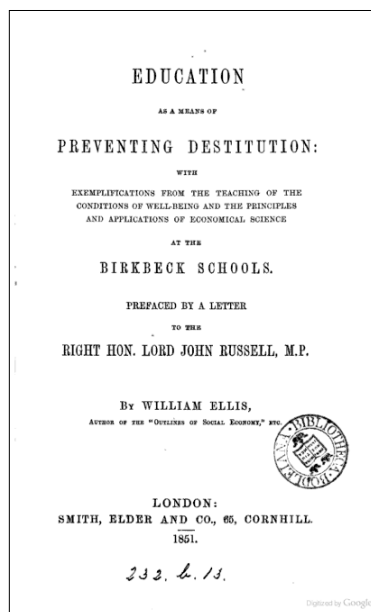
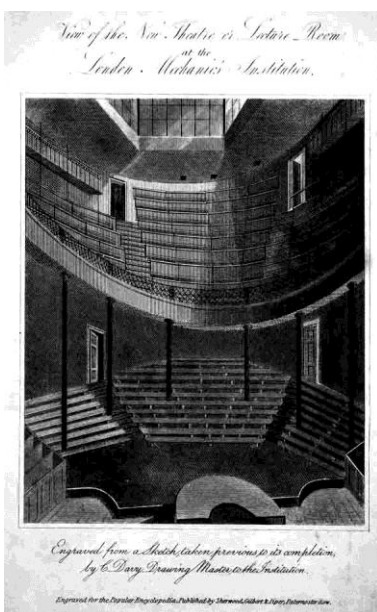


Figure iii. The LMI's lecture room (left) was hired by William Ellis from July 1848 as the venue for the first of his Birkbeck Schools. Ellis' teaching methods were anticipated in his *Conversations upon Knowledge Happiness, and Education between a Mechanic and a Patron of the London Mechanics' Institution* (1849, right) and his lectures to parents were published as *Education as a means of Preventing Destitution* (1851).



Figure iv. Colvestone Primary School, London E8, opened as the 6th Birkbeck School in 1852. The school's buildings (by T E Knightley) reflect some of the most progressive elements of Ellis' philosophy. They 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'. They contrast strongly with other, later Board schools in London.

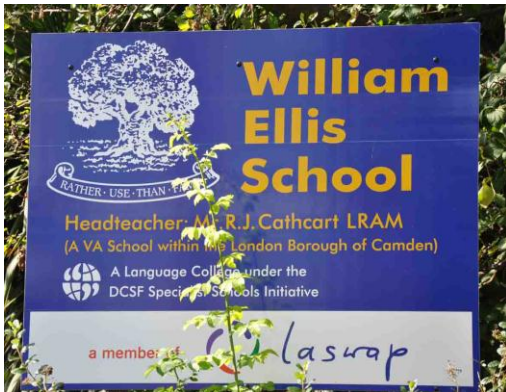


Figure v. The 1870 Education Act spelt the end for the Birkbeck Schools, which from their inception catered (like the Mechanics' Institution itself) for a rather different social class from that for which they were originally intended. Some closed (like the first school which, still meeting in the LMI's Lecture Theatre, was condemned by the London Board as 'inefficient'). Others became Board schools. Some, (like Colvestone, above) William Ellis (1862, the last of the Birkbeck Schools and the only one not to carry Birkbeck's name) survived as independent institutions by going up-market, charging higher fees.

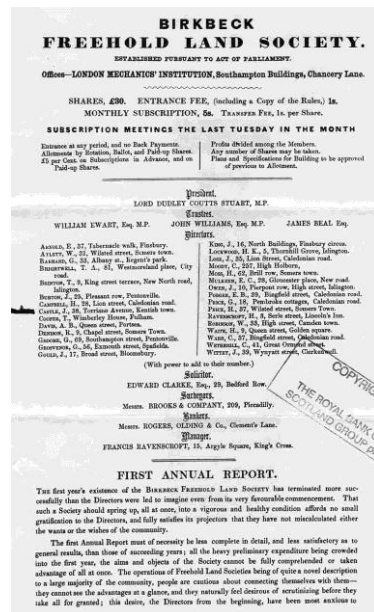
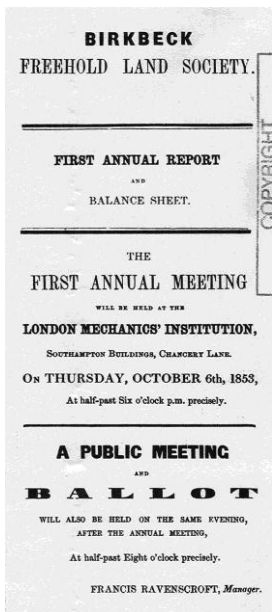


Figure vi. Annual Report and notice of the first Annual Meeting of the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society formed at the LMI in 1851 and which, with the Birkbeck Building Society and Birkbeck Bank, shared its premises until 1885. The BLBS' early material features many of the elements of the early terminating societies including ownership of land and property as a route to the franchise and their allocation to shareholders by ballot. But they soon, together with the Bank, became a commercial undertaking, emphasising personal fulfilment as a route to social progress through thrift and sobriety.



Figure vii. 'The New System of Buying a House Without Money' – advert in the *Sporting Gazette* 24 October 1874 used by Engels for his attack in *The Housing Question* (1872) on voluntarism and 'self help' as a solution to overcrowding: 'These building societies are ... sometimes formed under political or philanthropic pretexts, but in the end their chief aim is always to provide a more profitable mortgage investment... The sort of clients these societies speculate on can be seen from the prospectus of one of the largest, if not the largest, of them. The Birkbeck Building Society, 29 and 30, Southampton Buildings, Chancery Lane, London... introduces itself to the public in the following fashion: [quotes the first section, on pianos] *That is clear enough. There is no mention of workers, ... and in addition it is assumed that, as a rule, the applicants already possess a piano. In fact we do not have to do here with workers at all but with petty bourgeois and those who would like and are able to become such... only a few workers can, by way of exception, belong to such societies.*'



Figure viii. Birkbeck Tavern, Archway N19 (left, now flats) – all that remains of the first BLBS development (right, map 1862) that was fully built up by the 1890s, heavily bombed in the last War, became a notorious slum area following it and was redeveloped as a council estate in the 1970s.



Figure ix. Brems Buildings (left) built by Ravenscroft in 1885 as a new home for what by then had become the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution and its home (as Birkbeck College from 1907) until it moved to its present premises in 1952. Ravenscroft's bust, presented to the BLBS on the opening of its library in 1902 now sits on a windowsill in the Malet Street Council Room. From 1884 the BLBS and Bank occupied the whole of the Mechanics' Institution premises as shown by this cartoon from the *Police Gazette* 24 September 1892 (showing scenes of the first 'run' on the Bank).



Figure x. Birkbeck Road NW7, one of the last sites to be developed by the BLBS before the Bank's collapse. A fair proportion of the owners in this leafy suburb may well have had a piano – perhaps even sent their children to nearby Mill Hill School. However most of the surviving earlier 'Birkbeck Estates' are in less affluent neighbourhoods.

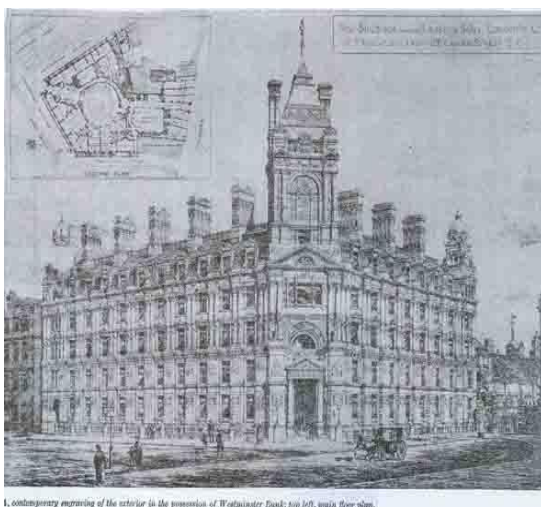


Figure xi. T E Knightley's Birkbeck Bank (1895-1902 on the site of the LMI) was, like his Birkbeck Schools, an 'instructional' edifice, but of a very different sort. Described by Pevsner as 'a phantasmagoria' and in the *Architectural Review* as 'the greatest single extravaganza of central London', the exterior was 'adorned with medallions with the portraits of Bessemer, Pugin... Edison, Flaxman, Brunel, Sir George Richmond, Tennyson, G Birkbeck (now at Birkbeck College), Villiers, Stephenson (now in the author's possession), Lamb, James Watt, 'Venetian Banker', Raphael, Hazlitt, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Robbia... The E façade was the craziest, i.e. fuller of diverse motifs than any other.' Nikolaus Pevsner, 1957. *The Buildings of England: London 1 The Cities of London and Westminster*.

1, contemporary engraving of the exterior in the possession of Westminster Bank; top left, main floor plan.



Figure xii. Demolition of the bank in 1962 revealed the 'educational' visuals in the Dome. 'Some were unexceptionable genre scenes: Merchant or Shipowner, Minting, Naysmyth's Steam Hammer, Copperplate Printing, Agriculture, Shipping, The Miser, Printing, Coining. The other seven were truly remarkable: a winged cherub representing the recent marvel of electricity; two scenes from the seventeenth canto of Dante's *Inferno* showing Fraud and Usurers; a graphic portrayal of *The Run on the Bank, September 1892*, a scene of gothic suburbia representing *The Building Society*; a Gothic model village representing *The Land Society* and finally, last but not least, the majestic figure of the god Apollo...' (*Architectural Review* 1965) recognisable (according to *The Times*) as 'the figure of the lamented manager, Mr Ravenscroft, with a dog, representing fidelity, and an eagle, representing foresight, at his feet' ('The New Birkbeck Bank'. *The Times* June 23 1902).



Figure xiii. The Birkbeck Bank (1895-1902) built on the site of the old London Mechanics' Institution (left) and (right) the new headquarters of the National Westminster Bank (1962-65) which now stand on the site at Staples Inn in High Holborn, London.

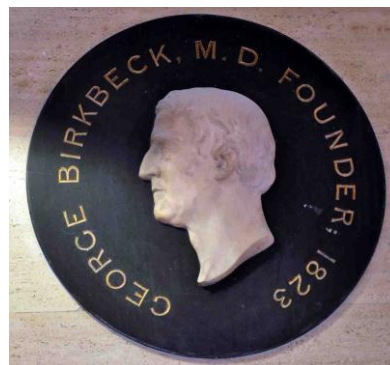


Figure xiv. (Left) Birkbeck College, successor to the London Mechanics' Institute, and which still embodies in its outlook and provision the tension between pragmatic self-interest and social action. (Right) Birkbeck Tavern in Stratford, East London, scene of the College's current expansion and 'outreach' (arguably, to the social classes for whom the original Mechanics' Institution was conceived). (Centre) A medallion – presently installed in the foyer of Birkbeck's Main Building in Malet Street - of George Birkbeck. It was commissioned by Francis Ravenscroft, manager of the Birkbeck Bank, to preside over the 'new' (1885) Lecture Theatre in Breems Buildings which the Bank financed so that it could first fully occupy and a few years later replace. The sculptor is George Foley who was subsequently appointed by Ravenscroft to produce the medallions which adorned the 'phantasmagoria' of the Birkbeck Bank.