

# 1. Adult Education - Gasping for Life a Century Later

## Victorian Laissez-Faire

Adulthood in Victorian times had no clear distinction. Not until 1880 was education to the age of 10 compulsory, the implication being children would start work, if not already in work. The leaving age increased to 11 in 1893 and 12 in 1899. Secondary education, established in 1902, was often in extended elementary schools which usually meant marking time at best.

That was it, other than for the wayward and destitute in need of occupation and control to keep them off the streets. No system of training and skills development existed, other than guilds, artisan groups, indenture systems, philanthropic groups and so on. The government did not see it had a role, a reason why Germany and the USA leapt ahead in innovation and productivity.

Vocational education, specific to a trade or job, was one facet of skills for life. Important too was imbuing the desire to continue learning, not necessarily job related, to expand horizons into subjects hitherto untouched, inculcating a spirit of social camaraderie. Apprenticeships, "Lit and Phil" Societies, Working Men's College, Mechanics Institutes and WEA all contributed hugely to vocational and social education. For that we thank enlightened thinkers, pioneers, educationalists and philanthropists, each of whom contributed immensely to a rich tapestry of learning and the huge benefits of social interaction. At last, adult education for the masses was purposeful and enjoyable - if they had the endeavour and time, and could get there.

## Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships can be traced from medieval times, the guild system and artisan trades. The Statute of Artificers of 1563 unified legislation. Apprentices were to serve a legally binding fixed term of at least seven years, ending aged 24; reduced to 21 in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Act was repealed in 1814. Of greatest concern were exploitative forms of child labour and 'blind-alley' jobs, such as messenger boys and unskilled factory work. The 1909 Royal Commission into the Poor Law laid bare the fragility of employment as those aged 16 to 20 drifted "into the low-skilled labour market, or the arms of unemployables."

Philanthropic societies sought a formal system as did the Jewish Board of Guardians working mainly in London's East End, and the Women's Industrial Council. The Central Bureau for the Employment of Women placed 400 girls in London in 1904 and the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association 100 boys and 159 girls in 1906, but such schemes were sporadic.

Most apprentices lived at home. Living-in continued for a while in some trades such as horse collar, harness and saddle making and coach-building. Apprentices started on a low wage, increased annually with greater skills. An 1894 inquiry stated, "they spend their money and their time at theatres and music halls connected with the public houses." Some employers arranged lodging houses for young apprentices, acting in a form of loco parentis, especially for those orphaned or whose parents were unable or unwilling to help.

The length of apprenticeships varied greatly by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A survey by Richard H. Tawney, Professor of Economic History at the London School of Economics, was published in the Economic Journal of 1909. It revealed that in Glasgow the trades of painting, plumbing, printing and iron-moulding still insisted on seven years instead of the more usual five years.

A survey carried out just prior to World War 1 stated the usual period for the boot and shoe trade was four years, but a quarter of employers stipulated six years. Typically, the first year involved menial tasks such as running errands and cleaning tools. For a court-dressmaker, insisting on two years, girls acted as runners between the workshop and stockroom and were not given a seat at a workshop table until the end of the first year. They then did a variety of tasks in specific sequence: bodices, skirts and finally sleeves. Instruction was given by an experienced worker or foreman/overseer.

Some trades required a premium to be paid such as special clothing whilst others expected an apprentice to provide their own tools. A report on boy labour by Cyril Jackson in 1908 stated the average premium was £17 7s 8d, whilst in 1912 for a London apprenticeship in carpentry or gun-making it was £20. A novel system existed in the leather-glove trade, centred in Yeovil, Worcester, Barnstable and Woodstock. Premiums were deducted as wages increased.

A variety of indenture systems operated, both written and verbal. A London handbook, issued in 1908 by the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association, unsurprisingly suggested written agreements, setting out clearly a commitment to teach, the length of apprenticeship, wages and the hours of work. Indenture documents were to be "stamped with an impressed Inland Revenue stamp of 2s 6p,"to be paid by the employer within thirty days of signature.

Pre-world War 1 there were 18 broadly defined areas of trade, from building and leather trades to hairdressing and the brewing industry but indentures were in decline. Views varied. A Bolton bootmaker felt, "both apprentice and master take a greater interest in their work, and so produce a better craftsman." This conflicted with another Bolton firm with "the boy being able to leave if dissatisfied, or dismissed if incompetent." Work performance was of concern to employers in fixing pay terms in advance, "irrespective of progress of the boy."

The law was a last resort for employers. 'Idle' apprentices occasionally appeared before the Chamberlain's Court in London. A maximum punishment of three years in the Bridewell could be imposed but this was extreme. Lateness was a problem as was bad behaviour and taking a 'sickie' to bunk off and watch a soccer match. Such behaviour verged on the "mutinous." In the case of Gilbert Hallam, an apprentice builder from Sparkbrook, his hours were from 6.30 am to 5.30 pm. Hallam decided to start at 8.00 am and leave at 5.00 pm on the pretext he was studying. The magistrate was unimpressed and threatened a custodial sentence if Hallam did not honour the terms of his indenture. Young Hallam mended his ways.

## **Literary and Philosophical Societies**

On 24<sup>th</sup> January 1793, Unitarian minister, Rev. William Turner, convened a meeting in the Old Assembly Rooms, Newcastle. The purpose was to found a library. He referred to the Royal Society and the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. In a paper he submitted, Rev. Williams emphasised two important natural resources: coal and lead, and need to investigate minerals, agriculture and antiquities. He wished to promote mathematical sciences and to establish a centre for "library intelligence." In accepting the paper, the forming group wished to focus on science and on new scientific discoveries, whilst embracing many other subjects with the exclusion of religion and politics! The first catalogue, containing over 500 works, was presented to the annual meeting (of men!) in 1796. Women were admitted in 1804.

In 1822 the membership decided to build a prestigious permanent home in the gardens of Bolbec Hall at 23 Westgate Road, and the new Lit & Phil opened in 1825. Accommodating over 8,000 books, it was always populated with leading thinkers of the day who met to talk

and exchange ideas. Early presidents of the society included Robert Stephenson, innovator and engineering magnate William Armstrong, Joseph Swan, inventor of the electric light bulb, and Charles Parsons, inventor of a turbine steam engine.

In 1815 George Stephenson demonstrated a miner's lamp and in 1880 the society's lecture theatre was the first public room in the world to be lit by electric light. The occasion was one of Joseph Swan's many lectures at the Lit and Phil. More than a library, this was a forum for leading thinkers of the day, especially on scientific and industrial matters, rivalling the Royal Society in London.

## **Mechanics Institutes**

The first Institute was founded in Edinburgh in 1821, followed two years later by Glasgow due to the efforts of George Birkbeck, Professor of Natural Philosophy at Anderson University in Glasgow. A physician and pioneer of education, his great interest was the study of nature and the physical world. In experiments, Birkbeck began working with skilled craftsmen & tradesmen, referred to as "mechanics" who installed, operated and maintained machinery for the booming industrial age. Birkbeck found mechanics to be surprisingly inquisitive. He was so impressed by their thirst for knowledge that he lobbied the University Trustees for the establishment of a "mechanics' class."

The result was a series of lectures for working men with the title: "Mechanical affectations of solid and fluid bodies." His first lecture attracted some 75 attendees. By the time he delivered his fourth lecture, about 500 men attended. In 1804 Birkbeck relocated to London and was succeeded by Dr Ure but in 1823 there was a falling out with the University authorities. The independent Glasgow Mechanics Institution was formed in the same year, the first in Britain.

The London Mechanics Institution opened in December 1823, pipped by Liverpool opening six months earlier. The small independent Manchester Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1824, the same year as Leeds. The inaugural meeting in Manchester, held in the Bridgewater Arms on 7<sup>th</sup> April, included: banker Sir Benjamin Heywood (Chairman); William Henry, a pioneer scientist; Quarry Bank mill owner Robert Hyde Gregg; Richard Roberts machine tool inventor; William Fairburn who worked with George and Robert Stephenson. Scientist, John Dalton, was a member too and became vice-president in 1840.

The aim was to teach artisans basic principles of science (mechanics and chemistry) through part-time study. The Mechanics Institute building is grade II listed and is best known as the birthplace of the TUC founded in 1868, the Co-operative Insurance Society and Manchester Technical School thanks to John Henry Reynolds, a self-taught shoemaker. This later became UMIST (University of Manchester Institute of Science & Technology). By 1850 there were 610 Mechanics Institutes in England and 12 in Wales, serving a total membership of over 600,000. The number of institutes continued to grow and so did total attendance.

## **Camden Working Men's College**

The first College of its type was founded in 1854 at 31 Red Lion Square in Holborn, later moving to Great Ormond Street. An imposing new home was found at 44 Crowndale Road, King's Cross, in the Borough of Camden. This Grade II listed building, opened by the Prince of Wales on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1904, admitted its first students in 1905.

Known as the Camden Working's Men College, it was established by Christian Socialists to provide a liberal education for Victorian skilled artisans. The aim was to counter perceived

failings in the practice of the social theory of Associationism, based on Aristotelian ideas about thinking, learning, memory and their connections. The founding of the College was partially a response also to concerns about the revolutionary potential of the Chartist Movement.

Early supporters were closely associated with the Co-operative Movement and the emergent labour organisations. Founders included Frederick Denison Maurice, (the first principal) and Thomas Hughes (author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*). Major promoters and supporters were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Ford Madox Brown, Walter de la Mare and Octavia Hill.

Of the first College students: 45% were handicraftsmen, 20% clerks and 11% shopkeepers and warehousemen, reflecting the need for a social and more liberal education for adults, starved of a rounded secondary education. In the 1870s, the new college declined an offer to merge with the Working Women's College, founded by Elizabeth Malleon. Her intention was a co-educational college but this caused a furore. As a result, Frederick Denison Maurice and Frances Martin helped set up the College for Working Women in Fitzroy Street in 1874. This was later to be called The Frances Martin College.

### **Workers' Educational Association**

In 1902 Albert Mansbridge published the article, *Co-operation, Trade Unionism and University Extension*. He argued that he was concerned about the "lack of thinking power in the rank and file" of the labour movement. Mansbridge insisted that higher education for future working-class leaders would result in "right and sound action" in public affairs. At that time most trade unions were debarred by their own rules from spending money on education.

Mansbridge decided to form the Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men. The group was joined by trade unionists and by those in the co-operative movement. The inaugural conference was held in Oxford on 22nd August 1903, part funded by 2/6p from the housekeeping budget of Albert and his wife Frances, both 26 years old. In 1905 the name was changed to the 'Workers Educational Association' to reflect female and male membership.

A 'self-starter,' and largely self-educated, Mansbridge became an Anglican lay reader and was a copyist in the Board of Education, before becoming a clerk with the Co-operative Wholesale Society in Whitechapel in 1896. He attended evening lectures at the Battersea Polytechnic and university extension classes at King's College, London. By 1905 the WEA had a thousand members, a hundred affiliated bodies and eight Branches.

He taught evening classes in industrial history and economics but became distressed that the university extension system, created in 1873, appealed almost exclusively to upper and middle classes. The WEA was his antidote to discrimination. The WEA was quickly recognised by most British universities, and in 1905 Mansbridge abandoned clerical work to become its full-time general secretary. Under his guidance the WEA created a tutorial system and scholarly library (National Central Library) for working people, unaffiliated with an academic institution.

Lectures included the arts and social sciences, reading groups were established and nature-study rambles organised. Arthur Balfour gave his full support to the WEA. So did Winston Churchill. "It ought to be perfectly possible in this country for a man of high, if not necessarily and extraordinary, intellectual capacity to obtain with industry and perseverance the best education in the world, irrespective of his standing in life."

Helped by Charles Gore, bishop of Worcester, Albert Mansbridge formed an alliance with a group of young academics from the University of Oxford, including Richard H. Tawney, William Temple and Alfred Eckhard Zimmern. They wanted to reform their university to make it more open to working-class men. A joint report, published in November 1908, provided for tutorial classes at a low fee, hoping some worker-students might proceed from these classes to full-time study at the university.

### **Purpose of Adult Education**

In 1917, Prime Minister Lloyd George's government created the Ministry of Reconstruction. It was charged with the task of overseeing the rebuilding of 'national life on a better and more durable foundation,' once the Great War had finished. One of numerous committees was on adult education. Luminaries included Albert Mansbridge, Basil Yeaxlee, heavily involved in the development of adult education in YMCAs, and Arthur Smith, Master of Balliol College, Oxford. The remit was to 'consider the provision for, and possibilities of, adult education, other than technical and vocational.' The Committee unilaterally 'adjusted' the remit to include these.

Richard Tawney drafted much of the final report of 1919, emphasising the social purpose of education, and notion to create 'a well-ordered welfare state or Great Society.' In a covering letter to Lloyd George, the Chairman, Arthur Smith, stated its prime purpose: 'to fit a man for life, including not only personal, domestic and vocational duties but also duties of citizenship. 'The whole processes must be development of the individual in relation to the community, promoting as well a healthy democracy, harmonious industrial relations and removal of the 'cankers' of drink and prostitution.'" Adult education was a necessity, not a luxury.

Acknowledged too was the work of voluntary organisations. 'Sporadic and disconnected', the need was to integrate their considerable efforts within a national system. As well as the WEA, also cited were the contributions of the co-operative movement, Working Men's College and Morley College in London, Swarthmore in Leeds, Fircroft Residential College in Birmingham and Vaughan Memorial College in Leicester, as well as university extension programmes and support given by trade unions to Ruskin College. These gave expression to lifelong education, and higher education, accessible by all adult men and women.

The main objective of adult education was 'not merely to heighten the intellectual powers of individual students, but to lay the foundations of more intelligent citizenship and of a better social order.' Technical training, 'whilst necessary and beneficial, and an integral part of our educational system,' was not viewed as an alternative to non-vocational education, regarded as of universal benefit. The former depended on the 'character' of employment.

An expansion of public funds was called for and a greater role for universities, especially the creation of extra-mural departments, and an increased role for the WEA and other voluntary organisations. Richard Tawney was far-sighted for three reasons. He wished 'to foster the capacities and attributes required to create a new, fairer and more democratic society.' Much in his mind too was creating the capacity and resources to meet demand and thirdly to ensure equality of opportunity. He was acutely aware of the need for full educational access by all women in pursuing a 'humane liberal education.'

Whilst the social purpose of education was pivotal, the vocational benefits were underplayed, given somewhat constricting terms of reference. The Committee was against the artificial divide between academic and vocational, observing also the status of the former was held in

greater esteem. In spite of their concerns, this has continued to dog education policy to the present day, with economic reverberations as well as societal.

The British Institute of Adult Education, formed in 1921, quickly moved away from university extension classes to "various auxiliary services," that meant a wide array of voluntary agencies to create less formal but more accessible opportunities. This included collaboration with the BBC for educational use of the wireless, setting up a commission on educational and cultural films, an inquiry into reading habits and, in liaison with the National Council of Social Service, schemes for the unemployed that combined work with education.

The 1919 Report's lasting influence lies less in its direct practical or political impact and actual provision, and more to its pervading influence. It established adult education as a 'distinctive domain of education,' in elucidating its ethos and purpose and in highlighting its potential and limitations.

## **A Fundamental Shift**

Not until the 1944 Education Act were education authorities given responsibility to provide 'adequate facilities' for further education. This led to an explosion of colleges with a focus on qualifications such as RSA, especially commercial courses in shorthand & typing, ONC, OND, HNC and HND and a multitude of other certificated courses. Colleges continued to provide GCEs and GCSEs at Ordinary and Advanced levels for entry into technical, vocational and professional studies.

It is helpful to split adult provision into learning for work, learning for life and learning for leisure, whilst acknowledging overlaps. Colleges tended to focus on qualifications for work and life skills such as foundational GCEs & GCSEs. Now the emphasis of life skills is basic English and Maths and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). These are provided 'free' by colleges, adult education centres (AECs) and other approved organisations.

Adult learning aimed to provide a resource for 'leisure-time occupation, in such organised cultural training and recreational activities as are suited to their requirements, for any persons over compulsory school age who are able and willing to profit by the facilities provided for that purpose.' Evening institutes, offering courses for adults, more than doubled between 1947 and 1950 to 11,000 with an increase of about 50% in students to 1.25 million. They continued to flourish in the 1950s with commercial and professional courses highly popular.

From 2010 especially, colleges and AECs have come under the spotlight, not only restricting funding to approved qualification courses, but adding a weighting factor for success rates too. Formerly, adult education centres devoted much provision to leisure education such as dance, music, exercise, cooking, cake decoration, flower arranging and car maintenance et al. Many still do but three things stand out. Invariably the range has reduced, with more emphasis on skills-based courses such as computing, and courses are now full-cost. Government subsidies have ceased for 'learning for pleasure' provision. Whilst WEAs continued to operate and U3as have started to flourish, a gap is evident eg Cooking for Pleasure that requires facilities too.

Rooted in the foundations of adult learning was personal growth and development that had a direct and almost subliminal effect on livelihoods, aspirations, success and quality of life. With this came the values of citizenship and notion of a good society, instilling the intrinsic benefits of learning, irrespective of how and if applied in a formal sense. This was part of the remit of Mechanics Institutes and WEAs.

## Demise of the System

The consequence of this monumental shift is a decline in part-time and mature higher study, closure of university adult education departments, reduction in opportunities for adults to learn for reasons other than employment or employability, and cuts to adult education, so deep as to threaten its existence - to the point of extinction!

Added to this a narrowing of the school curriculum and reduction in education budgets in real terms that may have a domino effect in later life. State schools especially have little option than focus on a core curriculum that may become outdated in failing to meet the demands of a digital and A.I. world, and a much changed society.

Under threat too is a major repository of knowledge viz our library service with the closure of 340 libraries in the six years to 2016. The position is set to worsen as local authority budgets have been pared to the bone.

In reflecting, we are losing so much and have lost so much too. Apart from a few, such as the Lit & Phil in Newcastle, where are other thriving Lit & Phil societies, mechanics institutes and voluntary organisations. The situation is becoming desperate as statutory provision is dwindling by the year in the face of draconian financial cuts.

An end of term report on adult education reads, 'students are disillusioned and disaffected by the system.' Add too those people excluded by lack of opportunity, lack of course provision, inability to meet spiralling charges – and maybe a lack of motivation, weary of trying to battle the system. At stake is enriching quality of life and a more vibrant, outward-looking society.

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