

## Duns Working Men's Institute

David McLean (2022)



### The Purpose of Institutes

There were essentially two broad purposes to organisations such as working men's institutes. The first involved the strong drive towards self-improvement which characterised the nineteenth century - opportunities must be given to young men and women to improve their knowledge and skills. Working men's institutes were only one example of how self-improvement was promoted. Many towns had mutual improvement societies, evening classes, debating groups, lecture courses and 'penny readings' where people literally paid one penny to sit in an audience and listen to readings from books. Mechanics' institutes were another example, providing lectures and demonstrations on scientific and technological subjects. This type of self-improvement was considered to be especially important if the working classes were to be entrusted with the vote.

The second purpose of institutes and the like was to keep the working classes out of public houses. There was huge concern - seriously founded - about the effects of alcohol on the

lower classes and there was scarcely a town anywhere which did not have a temperance or total abstinence society to campaign against the evils of drink; invariably, these were also the providers of lectures. But, if men were to be kept out of inns, there needed to be other places to go and other ways to keep them happily occupied. If their self-improvement could be fostered at the same time, so much the better.

### **The Origin of Duns Working Men's Institute**

It seems that the inspiration for the Duns Institute came from a temperance lecture. In March 1873, David Milne Home of Milne Graden (and Wedderburn and Paxton) was invited to give a lecture in the Town Hall for the Dunse Total Abstinence Society. At the end, he suggested that the town community might try to provide a place where men could read newspapers and spend their leisure time without resort to public houses. The idea was well received and a trust was set up to own and manage a working men's institute.

Over the next few years, the local gentry were not slow to offer financial support to implement and sustain such a venture. Sir William Miller of Manderston, MP for Berwickshire in 1873, said he would donate 100 guineas, an offer which he later doubled. Lady Pringle of Langton sent £50. Robert Baillie Hamilton, MP for Berwickshire by 1874, also gave £50 and loaned the trust £300; he later declined repayment of this and made it a gift. A fund-raising bazaar in the autumn of 1874 raised a further £400. In 1876, William Hay, who had only recently come to live at Dunse Castle following the death of his father, gave £100. But donations, large and small, came in from all sorts of people in Dunse and the surrounding area – including a clock for the reading room presented by the parishioners of Fogo church. Lectures were frequently organised in the Town Hall to raise further funds. Financially, at least, the Institute was off to a good start.

### **Finding a Property**

The trust seems to have rented space in the town to set up temporary facilities (especially for a reading room and library) while they looked for an appropriate building. In late 1873, they settled on a property with a shop on the ground floor and house above on the north side of the Market Place, opposite the Town Hall. It had belonged to George Dods, a candle maker, and, after his death, his heir (a Miss Purves) agreed to sell the building to the Institute trustees. The price was £600 and Miss Purves, very reasonably, agreed to take £300 up front and leave the other half of the money as a loan on which the Institute would pay 5% interest per annum.

However, by the 1870s, many of these properties in the Market Place were already a hundred years old. It was not long - the summer of 1875, in fact - before members were looking at 'the capability of the present building'. Local architect David Duns was asked to draw up plans to alter and enlarge the premises. He estimated that a two-storey rebuilding would cost some £500 while a three-storey version would require £700. There was clear unease about the cost and, in November 1875, some members proposed selling off their Market Place property

altogether and looking for a site on which to erect a new building. After much debate, members voted 37:24 to back the plan to improve the building they already had.

In early 1876, the architect's plans were approved and estimates were sought from various tradesmen in and around the town. The lowest tenders for the reconstruction totalled almost £900, well above the figure previously suggested. There was renewed nervousness since the Institute did not have that kind of money – £500 would have to be borrowed. A 'lengthened and fiery discussion' followed but Institute members voted by an 'overwhelming majority' to go ahead anyway and, by the spring of 1876, all the contract documents had been signed. Once more, temporary premises were sought to accommodate the Institute's activities and the shop tenant had to move out while large-scale building works were executed.

The plans drawn up by David Duns required a major demolition of the existing building, including its façade. The new Institute would have three storeys. The ground floor would continue as a shop which would bring the Institute a regular rental income. The middle storey would contain the Institute rooms. And the top, attic floor would provide accommodation for a caretaker. So far, so good. Unfortunately, the reconstruction work was about to land the Institute in a lengthy and costly legal case.

### **The Institute v Nichol Allan**

The property next door to the Institute, on the west side, belonged to Nichol Allan. As a farmer and butcher, he was clearly doing quite well. In addition to his butcher's shop with house above in the Market Place, he had a stable and slaughterhouse in North Street and was also tenant of Middlefield farm near Gavinton, where he lived. By October 1876, most of the Institute building had been taken down and the cellars had been dug out to make way for new foundations. It had become, in effect, a gap site. It was then that disaster struck.

Around 9am one morning, there was a loud noise as the front corner of Nichol Allan's property subsided and a number of serious cracks appeared in his front wall. His shop window smashed and another was seriously buckled. Numerous cracks also appeared in ceilings inside his property. Some were convinced that Allan's building was leaning to the east. There were no injuries but the prospect of the building collapsing altogether attracted a crowd and a policeman had to be stationed in the area. Rapid work was done to prop up Allan's walls and shore up the cellar next door.

Within a month, Allan had presented a petition in the sheriff court against the trustees of the Institute. He sought to have his gable wall rebuilt and the front wall and interior of his property repaired. The trustees decided to fight the case, arguing that the demolition and building works had been carried out with skill and care. Further preparatory evidence was heard by the court in December when lawyers for the defenders claimed there was no damage to Allan's gable and the interior ceiling cracks had been there for years.

Sheriff-substitute Dickson gave his decision in January 1877. He referred to the cellars having been dug out to 9 feet below the surface and 5 feet below the foundations of the mutual gable wall; the excavations had gone as close as 6 inches to that wall. However, the sheriff found that the work had been carried out with caution and skill. He said that the gable

wall was undamaged. He also found that Allan's front wall had never been built properly in the first place and that the later removal of an external stone staircase had probably weakened it further. So, he dismissed the petition; Nichol Allan appealed the decision.

The appeal was heard by Sheriff-principal Pattison in April 1877 after he had visited both buildings. He reversed the previous decision. Most telling was his declaration that the demolition and excavation work had been done 'without obtaining judicial authority' (the equivalent of our planning permission). The builders, he said, may well have exercised skill and care but that had not prevented their work causing considerable damage to Allan's property and the trustees of the Institute were liable for repairs.

The matter rumbled on for most of the next year as the two parties then argued about the nature of the repairs which were needed. In February 1878, Sheriff Pattison decided to end the argument by remitting the repairs to an independent party, a Galashiels architect and builder called Andrew Herbertson; he would specify and oversee the necessary work and the Institute would pay the bill. The case returned to the court in December 1878 by which time the repairs to Allan's property had been completed at a cost of £30. Pattison instructed the Institute trustees to pay this bill and Allan's legal expenses. But now the trustees threatened to appeal to the Court of Session!

It would appear that they did not go this far but it was another two and a half years before the case was finally settled. The Institute's account book shows over £70 being paid to Nichol Allan in July 1881 which can only have been to cover repairs to his property and his legal costs. The Institute's own defence costs, of course, added to their expense. So, it had taken almost five years from Allan's property being damaged to the matter being concluded.

## **Building the Institute**

By the time the legal case was finally resolved, the new Institute had already been built and in operation for four years. It was widely agreed that David Duns had produced a masterly plan for the building and a decided enhancement of the town's architecture. Although the street frontage occupied less than 30 feet, the building extended half as far again from front to back. An excellent shop some 20 feet square with two large display windows occupied the ground floor; there was also back-shop storage and a cellar. The shop was advertised in November 1876 with the expectation that entry would be possible the following spring. Annual rent of £58 was expected. Behind the shop were two large rooms which could be rented as offices.

A second door, right next to the alley, accessed the stairs to the upper floors. The middle storey contained the Institute's rooms. There was a reading room immediately above the shop and of the same dimensions. Behind it was a room intended for a town museum; cases containing artefacts were moved there from the Town Hall. There were sliding doors between the two rooms so that they could be opened up into one large space. On the east side of the middle storey, there was a committee room to the front and a smoking/recreation room and library behind it. The top floor attics contained ample accommodation for a caretaker or 'keeper of the Institute' as the post-holder was at first grandly known. The caretaker was offered a 'free house, coal and light' (gas) plus all necessary cleaning equipment.

The architecture of the street frontage was Flemish in style. The differing window sizes at each level gave a fine sense of proportion. Most unusual were the three Elizabethan columns which sprang not from the ground but from protruding stone corbels set at first floor level. They were meant to give the impression of supporting the stone frieze above, proudly (if somewhat ostentatiously) carved with 'Workingmen's Institute AD 1877'. Above that were carved the 'arms of Dunse' and the town motto 'Invictus'. There was no other frontage in the town centre like it and yet, perhaps strangely, it was never out of place.



It had taken four years since the original idea for the Institute but the building was nearing completion by the spring of 1877. Waddell & Cowper of Gavinton were the builders and, from Dunse, Thomas Swan did the joinery, John Aitchison the slater work, Charles Marshall the plumbing and William Smith the plaster work. The total cost for the new premises came to around £1700; this seems an extremely high figure but probably included the purchase price of the original building. Various donations and the proceeds of a bazaar had raised £1200 but the trustees had been compelled to borrow £600. They hoped to reduce this debt from the annual rental of the shop. Hay of Dunse Castle officially opened the Working Men's Institute to great fanfare in the summer of 1877.

## Membership and Activities

Men became members of the Institute by paying a yearly or half-yearly subscription which entitled them to use the reading and recreational facilities; visitors to the town could pay to use the Institute at a daily rate. Even in the original building (before the reconstruction), at least 60 men became members. The size of the membership fluctuated over the years and the trustees frequently wished more men would join so as to increase income. However, membership was very healthy by the turn of the century and reached a near-record 120 in 1912. The Great War naturally saw a huge decline with only some 20 members at one point. That figure had doubled by 1930 but was still a long way short of the Institute's heyday. When the new Institute was occupied in 1877, subscriptions were set at 2/6d per annum. As costs rose after the First World War, the subscription was raised to 3/6d. Then, it increased further to 4 shillings and to 5 shillings (25 pence in our money) in 1928. It was still at that level in the early 1950s but members were much harder to attract by that time and it would have been counter-productive to raise the cost of membership further.

The reading room and library were the focus of the self-improvement aspect of the Institute. Newspapers were highly valued in the nineteenth century since, apart from listening to speakers, they were the only way of finding out what was going on in the world. But newspapers were too expensive for working class people. The reading room contained a large specially-made table in the centre on which was placed an extensive selection of newspapers and magazines - which must have represented good business for one or more local newsagents. Seating was placed around the perimeter of the room.

One of the most interesting features of the Institute was that meetings were held every six months at which the members voted on whether to keep the current selection of newspapers and periodicals or drop some and replace them with new selections. They were clearly politically aware - in 1877, they voted to drop the 'Daily Telegraph' because the newspaper had 'taken up a position in regard to Turkish affairs with which most members disagreed'. At each of these meetings, the previous half year's papers and magazines were sold off to the members by auction! There was rarely any difficulty in selling these - further evidence of the value placed on such reading material by working men.

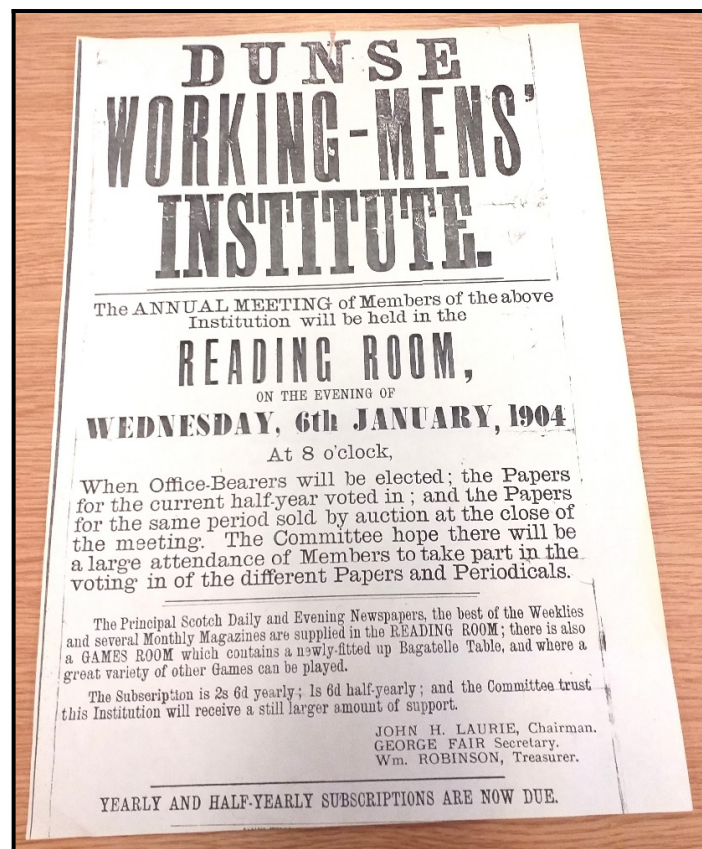
The library started off with some 200 books, many having come from the now defunct Mechanics' Institute. Donations of further volumes were received from time to time and the Institute itself occasionally purchased books as funds allowed. But surely no gift was as handsome as the 42-volume set of Encyclopaedia Britannica donated by architect David Duns who had designed the property.

The smoking and recreation room was also popular. Even then, there were some in the town who disapproved of smoking (mainly of pipes) but banning it would no doubt have seriously affected the membership. Games such as chess, draughts, bagatelle, dominoes, darts and cards (eventually - not permitted in the early days) were played. It would appear that a billiard table was installed at one point. And, in 1923, membership took a decided upward turn when air gun shooting was introduced. The Institute had clear rules - swearing, betting, spitting on the floor, unnecessary noise and dogs were all specifically banned. Infringement

of these rules would see the offender's membership cancelled with no refund of subscription. The recreation room had to close each night at 10pm.

## Financial Upkeep of the Institute

Despite some generous donations at the outset, the trust required to borrow money to finance construction of the new Institute and then had to borrow more in order to pay for the litigation costs of the case pursued by Nichol Allan. The upshot was that the trust was encumbered by a debt of £600 - mortgaged against the property - from 1877. The trust's regular income came from the shop rental, the members' subscriptions and from hiring out a couple of rooms as offices for local businesses (for example, Agnew the solicitor and Swan the auctioneers). Occasional income came from donations, fund-raising events and from town clubs and societies hiring the committee room for their own meetings. The Plymouth Brethren worshipped in one of the rooms. Against the income, there was expenditure on the upkeep and decoration of the building, purchasing newspapers and magazines, paying the caretaker and servicing the debt; at least some of the Institute office-bearers also received a payment of sorts. Although the Institute never suffered a financial crisis, balancing the books was often challenging and there were certainly years when expenditure was greater than income.



*Advertising the AGM in 1904 – and still using the old 'Dunse' spelling!*

There had always been hopes that the rent from the shop would contribute annually to a reduction of the debt. The trust had no difficulty in attracting tenants. Robert Cowe had set up in business in the town making boots and shoes in the early 1860s. He moved to the new shop when the Institute was rebuilt and stayed there for over 30 years, helped by his son, until his retirement around 1910. His grandson, also called Robert Cowe, was the first member of the Duns Working Men's Institute to die on the battlefields of the Great War. He was shot in the head by a Turkish sniper in the Dardanelles in 1915, before reaching his eighteenth birthday.

The shop rental, however, made no impression on the debt. The trust owed £600 in 1877; the trust still owed £600 in 1912! In that year, it was decided to make a concerted effort to clear this once and for all with a grand bazaar over two days in the town's Drill Hall. An enormous effort went into this and there was an impressive array of stalls and amusements. Over £620 was raised - the Institute had extinguished its debt at last.

### **Demise of the Working Men's Institute**

Membership numbers never really recovered after the Great War and, by the 1930s, the Institute was in a decline of sorts. The finances were not the main issue. The Institute had been free of debt for a long time and, when a serious fire in early 1930 destroyed some buildings behind the Institute which the trust owned, they turned the situation to their advantage. They sold the fire-destroyed site at auction for £10 and invested their £400 insurance pay-out in government stocks. While running at a loss became an annual occurrence, their bank balance was secure and regular whist drives topped up the funds.

It was therefore not so much money as membership which was the problem. The Berwickshire News correspondent 'Man-in-the-Street' reckoned that he saw the same faces every time he visited the Institute and very few young men were using the place. It was hardly surprising. Times were changing, even in the shop, which was leased in early 1935 to the Scottish Southern Electric Company. Newspapers were now much cheaper and many working-class homes got their own daily paper. By 1930, there were other rival attractions in the town such as Celeste Forte's billiard room in North Street. Then, in 1935, came the Regal Cinema in Easter Street, converted from the old East United Presbyterian Church. By the 1940s and 1950s, more and more homes had the wireless (radio) and then television. Dominoes and darts in the Institute could no longer compete!

The Working Men's Institute trust still exists today - although it consists of just a couple of trustees. The shop on the ground floor continues to function and, from time to time, local organisations and small businesses have hired the upstairs rooms as a few still do today; one of the rooms houses the archive of Dunse History Society. It has to be said, however, that the longer-term future of this Category B listed building is uncertain.





*The alleyway beside the Institute. The door accessed a meeting room in which the Plymouth Brethren worshipped. Note the iron corner-plate to protect the stonework from cart wheels.*

*The information in this article has been researched from newspapers of the time (mainly the 'Berwickshire News'); from the minute book (covering 1873-1876 only) and accounts book of the Duns Working Men's Institute held at the Heritage Hub in Hawick; and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.*

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