

The inscription in the pediment on the former Pillgwenlly Library, Newport, South Wales. cc-by-sa/2.0
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Knowledge is Power: The Struggle for Education for All

The doyen of working-class academics, Peter Shukie, has called for much of the education system to be torn down and replaced by something new. Shukie's rallying cry of 'education for all' replicates that of the pioneers of universal education in the 18th century, who aspired to change an education system that provided for only a small section of society. Here we explore the people, institutions and buildings behind the struggle for education for all.

Sunday Schools



The Sunday School at Cawsand Congregational Church in Cornwall was located beneath the church's auditorium. © Mr John Midgley. Source: Historic England Archive IOE01/15959/35

Our journey starts with the earliest attempts to move education from the elite to the working class, which were provided by non-conformist organisations in the form of Sunday Schools.

The most famous one, Robert Raikes' school for chimney sweeps, was established in 1780. Based in the appropriately named Sooty Alley, it was typical of the time. Set in a modest building near Gloucester prison, it did not advertise its presence. As with the Cawsand Sunday School, it hid its intentions due to widespread hostility amongst conformist churches and the ruling class.

The hostility experienced by many of the pioneers was neatly expressed by Jacob More, a noted headmaster in Bristol, whose concerns were that 'too much learning rots female brains'. His attitude suggests that he would not have approved of his daughter, Hannah, who was the founder of many Sunday Schools in the area and an enthusiastic supporter of education for all.

Thanks to the work of Raikes, More and others, Sunday Schools became an established feature of towns and villages throughout the country.



This particularly vernacular example of a Sunday School building at Instow combines a first-floor school room with storage and stables below. Behind is the Parish Church of St John the Baptist. © Dr Ann Allen. Source: Historic England Archive IOE01/11046/16

Mechanics' Institutes



The Mechanics' Institute in Burnley, Lancashire, was built in 1854-5. It's palazzo-style design echoes the palaces built by wealthy families in 15th-century Italy. © Crown copyright. Historic England Archive BB81/05989

Whilst Sunday Schools focused primarily on educating the young, the foundation of Mechanics' Institutes during the industrial revolution moved education for all to adults, and specifically working-class adults.

The Quaker doctor and educator George Birkbeck's first attempt at teaching adults about the machines they were working with proved wildly popular. Soon Mechanics' Institutes sprouted up throughout the country, often housed in ostentatious buildings such as the Mechanics' Institute in the heart of the mill town of [Burnley](#).

The impressive nature of the buildings could be viewed as an attempt at gaining respectability. Despite this, there was still great unease that education might give people ideas 'above their station'; something not dampened by the expansion of the curriculum to embrace general education rather than just industrial training.



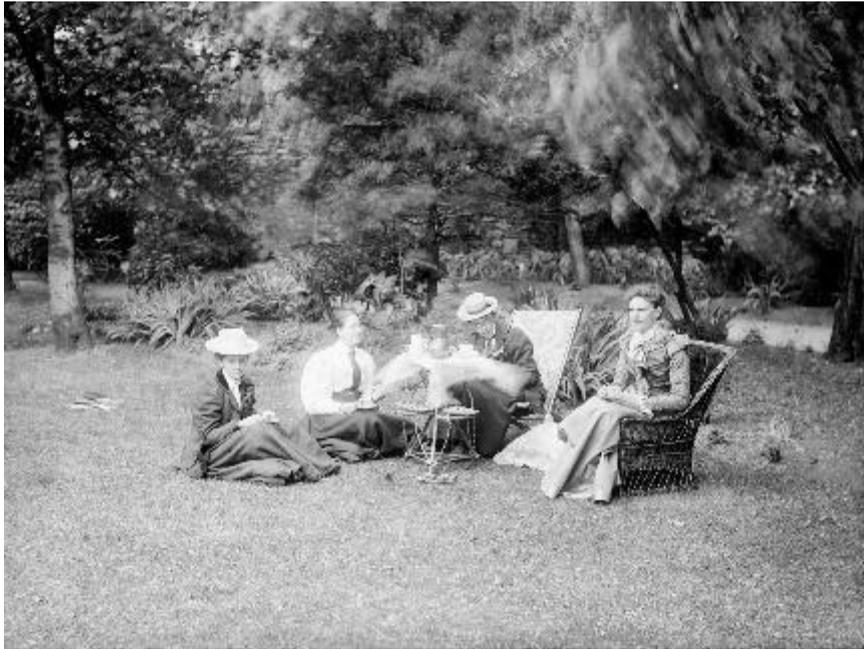
The well-lit Reading Room in the Mechanics' Institute in the centre of Swindon's Railway Village. Built in 1853-5, it was funded by the town's Great Western Railway workers. Source: Historic England Archive BB94/04776

Education for Women



Bedford College was founded in 1849 to provide higher education for women. It moved to these new premises in Regent's Park, London, in 1913. Source: Historic England Archive BL22200

Although promoted as a way of providing education for all, Mechanics' Institutes focused primarily on educating men and deep into the late 19th century, the education of women was still rare. With full emancipation of women not achieved until 1928, it was left to organisations such as Bedford College and Somerville College to promote women's education.



Founded in 1879, Somerville College was one of two colleges established at Oxford following the formation of the Association for the Higher Education of Women. The tea party was an important part of college social life. Source: Historic England Archive CC50/00694

Their limited success is illustrated by the fact that it took until the turn of the 20th century for degrees to be awarded to women passing university courses. Prior to this, they were only allowed to be awarded a Certificate of Proficiency.

Libraries



The Reading Room and Reference Library at the Central Lending Library, Birmingham. This grand building was demolished in 1974 to make way for the city's next generation of library, which was itself replaced in 2013. Source: Historic England Archive OP04600

By the start of the 20th century, the movement towards education for all had gathered pace with libraries becoming a central feature of many towns. Often these buildings were visually arresting and designed to inspire those who entered them.



The inscription beneath the pediment on the former Pillgwenlly Library, Newport, South Wales, inspired the opening line 'Libraries gave us power', in the Manic Street Preachers' 1996 hit 'A Design for Life'. Image: cc-by-sa/2.0 © Robin Drayton – geography.org.uk/p/5303002

This inspiration extended to the wording placed on and in the libraries. Those funded by the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie at Pillgwenlly in South Wales and Hyndburn in Lancashire, feature the phrase 'Knowledge is Power'. The building at Hyndburn displays it on a stained glass window whilst at Pillgwenlly it appears proudly beneath the pediment. The latter has provided inspiration for many locals, including a group of musicians who brought a version of the phrase to wider attention in the opening line of one of their best-loved songs.

[Embed YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfEoVxy7VDQ> here]

Universities



Founded in 1899, Ruskin College in Oxford aimed to provide university standard education for working class people. Source: Historic England Archive HT12612

The call for 'education for all' in the Higher Education sector gathered momentum in the late 19th century with the foundation of Ruskin College. This was an institution explicitly dedicated to the education of working-class males. Its founders strived to ensure that the people they believed would one-day rule the country were given the skills needed to do so.

Whilst the idea of equipping the working class with the ability to lead proved hugely controversial, the establishment of The Open University in 1969 was a far more sedate affair. The purpose of the new university was to widen access and by a series of innovative approaches, such as the extensive use of radio and television as part of the pedagogy, it opened the door to university to many who had been excluded beforehand.



Initially based at Alexandra Palace in London, The Open University relocated to a campus at Walton Hall in Buckinghamshire. Its ambition was to provide the power of learning to anyone, anywhere © Dr W. A. Cooper. Source: Historic England Archive IOE01/01072/05

Despite the expansion of education outlined here, the demand for 'education for all' remains an active one. The tensions that still exist, can be summed up by a speech given by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, at Ruskin College on [18 October 1976](#) that proclaimed the twin goals of education should always be 'to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work.'

These twin aims are at the heart of the discussion regarding the purpose of education. The latter suggests that everyone is being prepared for an assigned place in society, whilst the former harks back to the words of one of the founders of Ruskin College, Walter Vrooman, who stated that 'knowledge must be used to emancipate humanity' – something that Shukie, and others who view 'education for all' as a key aim, would surely approve of.

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Further reading:

<https://heritagecalling.com/2019/09/11/eight-of-englands-most-magnificent-libraries/>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/womens-history/visible-in-stone/education/>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/englands-schools/>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1914-1945/the-right-to-education/>

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