



THE MARLOW INSTITUTE by Rachel Brown

The centenary of the opening of the Institute building in Marlow was celebrated in 1990. The Institute itself had existed since 1853 and had been reorganised in 1884. It met in a small building in the High Street and aimed to supply the literary and scientific needs of the town, supplemented by the Mutual Improvement Society with which it eventually amalgamated.

At a public meeting in January 1887, it was decided to have a new Institute building as a permanent local commemoration of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee (in addition to the more usual treats for school children and coals for the poor). General Owen Williams MP, President of the Institute, gave the site in what is now Institute Road. There was a prudent delay while funds were raised but eventually a start was made in 1889. Mr Somers Cocks (of Thames Lawn) laid the foundation stone and Colonel Wethered laid that of the adjoining building, which was to be the headquarters of the 1st Bucks Volunteer Rifle Corps. The buildings were to be "domestic Gothic" in style, costing £1630 for the Institute and £1040 for the Volunteer's building. Y.J. Lovell was the builder.

The new Institute comprised a recreation room, lecture room, library and offices and there were many gifts and endowments from prominent citizens.

A great public lunch was held on September 19th 1890 to mark the opening and there was an entertainment in the evening in aid of the building fund which still had to raise £480.

At that time it was noted that there were 555 members paying 7/6 (37p) annual subscription and a scheme was proposed to allow people to pay by instalments.

The Institute was not sectarian, religious or political - "all ranks were to pull together" - and there were to be opportunities for "increasing knowledge of science, extending the sphere of the arts and learning more and better of literature". There was hope for University extension courses. As time went on, other opportunities for education and entertainment became more accessible and the recreational nature of the Institute became predominant, but it was well supported up to and including the last war, especially as it provided facilities for billiards. Indeed in 1949 after much discussion and considerable opposition, a bar was installed.

But the advent of TV sounded the death knell and eventually in 1957 the Institute was closed and the County Council bought the building for £4000 for use as a library, the money going to the Marlow Educational Foundation.

It is humbling to think of the initiative and enterprise of those people of the late Victorian age. They were great times in Marlow: the new railway, the newly opened hospital, and, just 100 years ago, the new Institute building.

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