I should say at the outset that the Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution hasn’t existed since it was formally wound up in 1925 but its building in Market Street fronting Hadden Street to the design of the notable local architect Archibald Simpson still displays its original fine granite façade. It is a ‘listed building’ by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Buildings of Scotland, one of Archibald Simpson’s last works, that opened in 1846. Simpson was responsible for classical features in many of Aberdeen’s finest granite buildings and he was the architect who laid out Market Street as the main link between Union Street and the harbour.

As far as I know, nothing remains of the Mechanics’ Institution’s premises within because the building has been refurbished on several occasions as a hotel, most recently in 2011. However, the Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution has left an impressive legacy, for it thrived in the 19th century and gave birth to three local institutions that are very much part of the city today: the adult education classes of Robert Gordon’s Hospital (the original precursor of The Robert Gordon University), Grays School of Art (now merged with The Robert Gordon University) and the Aberdeen Public Library.

The Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution was inaugurated in 1824 for the purposes of ‘diffusing knowledge among the working classes’ and was hugely popular in the beginning. In the first year some 550 paid the annual subscription of 10/- and were treated to a course of lectures on Natural Philosophy and another on Chemistry aimed at improving public knowledge and understanding of these topics. The courses were given by Marischal College staff and later efforts brought in King’s College staff but the underlying message was not simply academic. To paraphrase the inaugural lecture, machinery generated the necessities and comforts of life. In these times the measure of civilisation of a society was judged by the state of its industry and its mechanical improvements. Those who wanted to move with the times needed to educate themselves in relevant subjects. Many did. It was a message that underpinned much of what happened in Britain in the 19th century.

The Institution soon acquired a life of its own independent of Aberdeen’s Universities. From the beginning it aimed to collect models of machinery and start a library, though it had no premises of its own. The Institution was born on a wave of enthusiasm for such initiatives.
There were soon 27 such societies in Scotland alone. However, lofty ambitions require benefactors over and above gratuitously given lectures and self-education requires sustained effort. Moreover, according to a future President, some of the University lectures went over the heads of a wide audience. The enthusiasm of all parties wavered during the 1820s.

Ladies were admitted as members of the Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution in 1829 contrary to the intentions of the founders, presumably as a response to demand but also to increase subscription income.

The Institution aimed from the beginning to organise education ‘for the working classes’. It developed its own syllabi and fostered its own qualified teachers. Classes were offered in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy and Chemistry on the technical side and English, French and Drawing, which tended to prove more popular. In 1840 in order to raise money for a permanent building the Institution organised a huge and hugely successful exhibition of ‘fine arts, natural history, philosophy, machinery, antiquities, curiosities, etc.’. A vast number of items were loaned from private individuals and other institutions. The catalogue of the exhibition ran to over 40 pages and some 3000 objects (I haven’t counted them) including a large number of ethnographic artefacts from around the world. This was education for everyone, by display, put on in a temporary building erected for the purpose.

In the following year they organised another exhibition for the benefit of the building fund, this time on a smaller scale, projecting large images of minute objects with the oxy-hydrogen microscope, showing transparencies relevant to astronomy, and using the Institution’s great transparent orrery to accompany a short series of lectures on astronomy. All this and a continuing program of popular lectures in succeeding years was successful for in 1845 Aberdeen was treated to one of the events of the decade – the laying of the foundation stone for the Institution’s premises.

On August 13th, 30,000 people watched from rooftops, from windows or joined the ceremonial procession to the Market Street site for laying the foundation stone. When the head of the procession with military band arrived ‘the scholars of Gordon’s Hospital halted, and took open order, as did also the True Blue Gardeners, Ship Carpenters, other bodies, and the Masonic Lodges, thus forming a line through which the Grand Lodge, Magistrates and Council, Members of the Institution, and Committee of Management, walked to the ground’. Lord Provost Thomas Blaikie conducted the laying with full ritual, the tools, level and other Masonic insignia before him on a table. Records and coins were placed in the cavity of the stone, which was lowered by Freemasons to accompanying music. The Provost struck the stone the requisite number of times with the mallet and pronounced the Masonic benediction “May the Great Architect of the universe enable us successfully to carry on and finish the work of which we have now laid the foundation-stone, and every other undertaking that may be for the advantage and embellishment of this city, which in His providence, may he long preserve from peril and decay.” Corn, wine and oil were thrown upon the stone to accompaniment of a brief prayer. There followed speeches, quoted in extensio in the press, and in the evening a celebratory banquet, reported at equal length, rounded off the day. A brass plaque on the foundation stone records the event and those involved.

Within a year the building was open for business at a cost of just over £3000 and the Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution could expand its work that would culminate in its notable legacies in the 1880s. That is another story.

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