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Former Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute 27 Victoria Avenue, Bishop Auckland Historic Building Report

Alastair Coey Architects

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FORMER BISHOP AUCKLAND MECHANICS' INSTITUTE 27 VICTORIA AVENUE, BISHOP AUCKLAND

HISTORIC BUILDING REPORT

Alastair Coey Architects

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SUMMARY

The subject of this report is the former Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute on Victoria Avenue, Bishop Auckland. It sits within the Bishop Auckland Conservation Area, to the south-east of the historic core. A substantial part of the existing building was constructed in 1880 and at an unknown later date, possibly circa 1900, the bridging section abutting the Temperance Hall was constructed, the roof altered accordingly and the internal staircase rearranged. The Mechanics' Institute ceased regular operation in around the 1970s and the building has mostly lain vacant since, with a number of short term retail tenants. This report was commissioned in late 2018 as part of a programme of works relating to the Bishop Auckland Heritage Action Zone and is intended to provide a more detailed understanding of the building fabric and historical context, through a combined programme of physical inspection and research.

The Mechanics' Institute is a good, compact example of its type, reflecting the movement's appreciation of high-quality architecture for its buildings. The interior contains a large amount of original details and evidence of the building's previous use. The Institute reflects a national movement, itself part of the late-19th century move for improved education. It retains associations with the Bishop Auckland family of architects which produced its designer, Robert Wilkinson Thompson, and local men who worked hard to run the Institute, notably its librarian and caretaker, Matthew Richley. The Institute offered a place of social gathering well into the 20th century and remains in the memory of the town.

CONTRIBUTORS

The report was prepared by Alastair Coey Architects. Historical Research was carried out by Rory Lamb, whilst the site investigation and measured survey were conducted by Alastair Coey with assistance from Ashley Turner. The plans were prepared by Ashley Turner, and the report was prepared for publication by Rory Lamb.

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ARCHIVE LOCATION
The photographic and report archive has been deposited with the Historic England Archive, The Engine House, Fire Fly Avenue, Swindon, SN2 2EH

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14/02/2019

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1 INTRODUCTION

The former Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute is located on the south side of Victoria Avenue within Bishop Auckland town centre, about 400m south of the town hall in Market Place. It stands just off Newgate Street, the main commercial artery of the town, within the Bishop Auckland Conservation Area (Figure 1). On its western side, the building abuts the end of a long building of matching height which stretches to Newgate Street and contains two shopfront units at ground-floor level. To the east a narrow, gated entry separates the Mechanics' Institute from the neighbouring Masonic Hall (formerly the Temperance Hall) but is connected to it by a later bridge extension. The building is largely the result of a single programme of work in the early 1880s with some later alterations.[1]

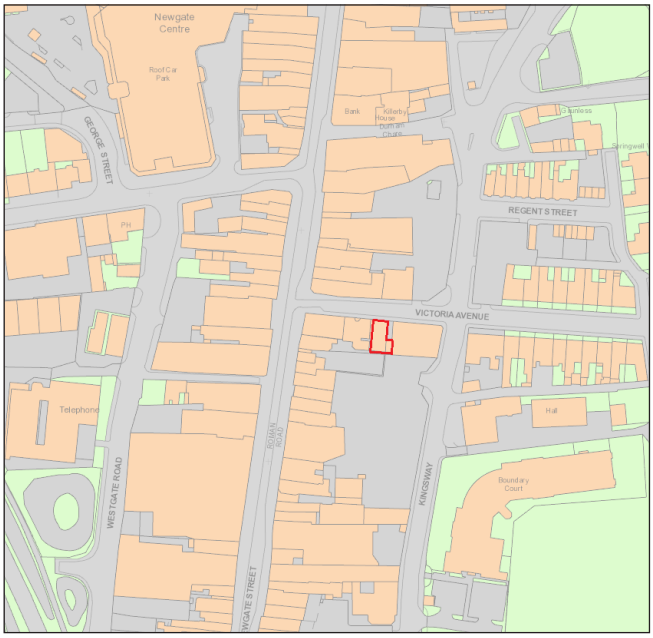

Figure 1: Location Map showing the former Mechanics' Institute outlined in red. (Modern Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown Copyright and database rights 2019. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence Number 100019088)

A Mechanics' Institute was first established in Bishop Auckland in 1828 but very little is known about its location or history and the organisation considered in this report was founded as the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute in 1847.[2] Initially the latter committee took rooms in Market Place until it bought a property in Silver Street in 1855. Having expanded over the following decade, the Institute demolished and rebuilt its building on Silver Street, operating from this property until 1879 when it was sold to finance the purchase of a site on Victoria Street and the subsequent construction of the existing Mechanics' Institute which was built in 1880.[3] The 1880 Institute building is the structure under consideration in this report.

The former Mechanics' Institute has lain vacant for most of the last 50 years with the exception of a range of short-term intermittent uses, including as a charity shop in 2007, and was damaged by fire in 2015.[4] This report was commissioned by Historic England as part of a programme of works relating to the Bishop Auckland Heritage Action Zone initiative. It is intended to provide a more detailed understanding of the building fabric, fixtures and historical context, through a combined programme of physical inspection and research. The report comments on the significance of the building, to enable decisions about its future to be

appropriately guided and framed by the opportunity to safeguard and enhance heritage values. The report will also contribute to the heritage-led regeneration of Bishop Auckland through the joint efforts of the Heritage Action Zone and partners Durham County Council and the Brighter Bishop Auckland Regeneration Partnership.

The historical research used a range of primary and secondary source material. Clifton Stockdale's thesis (1993) entitled *Mechanics' institutes in Northumberland and Durham 1824-1902*, comprising a survey of the Mechanics' Institutes of Durham and Northumberland, was particularly useful and provides a thorough contextual study of primary record collections in the North East.

Although the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute's own archive has not been identified, some relevant primary source material is held by the Durham County Record Office (DRO). This includes the building control plans and elevations for the building, submitted in 1880, and a selection of information relating to the activities of the Institute, mostly in the form of newspaper clippings included within the papers of the Institute librarian and town historian, Matthew Richley.

A Level-4 survey of the Mechanics' Institute was undertaken as part of this assessment to provide measured plans and enhance understanding of the structure, its use and development.[5] This involved a detailed internal and external on-site analysis carried out by a conservation architect and an architectural assistant. Annotated plans and a photographic record were prepared, which have been deposited with the Historic England Archive in Swindon.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Mechanics' Institute Movement

Mechanics' institutes arose in the context of a growing labour movement in the 19th century, resulting from increased campaigning for working class rights and education in industrial Britain. During the course of the 19th century they played a leading role in providing technical education to the working classes, but relied on an uneasy balance between enthusiastic 'working class self-educators', as Mansfield describes them, who sought to enlighten themselves and their peers, and the industrial employers who often provided the financial backing to the institutes but were wary that a broad education would lead their work-force to socialism.[6] This resulted in a sometimes tenuous existence which meant that records for individual institutes can often be poor.[7]

The first institute was founded in Glasgow in 1823 by industrial workers who sought to replicate a series of classes they had enjoyed from George Birkbeck, then professor of natural philosophy in the Andersonian Institute (now the University of Strathclyde).[8] The following year, Birkbeck and the statesman Henry Brougham, later the Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, were among the founders of the London Mechanics' Institution (now Birkbeck, University of London) with the aim of improving the education of the working classes both for the workers' benefit and to provide technical instruction to improve efficiency in industry.[9] Early promoters, such as Brougham, argued for the benefits of workers having a basic knowledge of science to promote efficiency and opposed counter-claims that the working class did not want to be educated or conversely that their education would lead to 'sedition and republicanism'.[10] By 1860, the movement had gained nationwide traction, with around 1,200 individual institutes and total membership of around 200,000.[11]

The North East of England, as an industrial region growing rapidly from the improvement of the Tyneside shipbuilding since the turn of the century and the expansion of the railways since 1825, proved fertile ground for the movement.[12] Population growth (for example County Durham rose from 149,000 in 1801 to 391,000 in 1851) exacerbated the inadequate educational provision in these areas, with a report of 1834 suggesting that only one in 30 children in Durham went to school.[13] The first institutes founded in the North East were Newcastle Literary Scientific and Mechanics' Institute; Sunderland Mechanics' Institute; and Alnwick Scientific and Mechanics' Institute (Figure 2), all founded by 1824, and by the end of 1825 there were another nine established.[14] Matthew Richley, the historian of Bishop Auckland and stalwart of its Mechanics' Institute, makes reference in his town history to an early Mechanics' Institute in Bishop Auckland in 1828, but no archival material can be found to support this, nor indeed is there any information on where (or indeed, if) this early iteration had premises.[15] Richley asserts that a new institute was founded as a replacement in 1847 and this property itself was rebuilt in 1866 in the context of the biggest building boom of the movement (1852-73), which included the construction of institute buildings at Blyth (1850), Blaydon

(1853), Steck (1853), Darlington (1854), and Newcastle (1865).[16]

Figure 2: Alnwick Mechanics' Institute, designed by William Smith, 1830s (© Stephen Richards and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic licence - geograph.org.uk/p/2383325)

Institute objectives concerned the intellectual and moral improvement of its members, seeking to teach as broad a scope of subjects as possible, arts and literature as well as technical instruction. Although many institutes were founded through grassroots interest and working-class people contributed to supporting them, they often relied on the support of a wealthy local landlord or industrial employer to keep their activities afloat.[17] The institutes established lecture series, classes, trips and exhibitions to encourage members to engage with education which might otherwise be inaccessible. From early on, an important part was the establishment of a library and reading room of periodicals and this expanded as a defining characteristic with the increased leisure time afforded to the working class in the late 19th century and the growth of the reading room movement from 1873.[18]

Scholars disagree as to the legacy of the movement in providing the working classes with education. It has been observed that lectures could be expensive and poor quality and that many working men were too tired after a day down the mine or on the railways to seek out education in the evenings.[19] The early enthusiasts of the movement did not take into account the physical difficulty of a day's labour in the coal mines, which reflected much of the industrial activity around Bishop Auckland.[20] Coupled with a perception amongst the working classes that it was foolish to seek social elevation, the result for the Mechanics' Institutes was that, according to Robert Elliot in 1861 'the banquet was prepared for guests who did not come'.[21] From the 1870s, Mechanics' Institutes often lost much of their original purpose, either catering more to the middle-classes or reducing their educational functions in favour of recreational games and activities. Although reading rooms remained popular, much of the scientific focus was reduced.[22] Towards the end of the 19th century they were also challenged by other educational establishments such as Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCAs), Working Men's Institutes, and independent educational foundations like Bishop Auckland's Lightfoot Institute. Unions of Mechanics' Institutes had been established in the previous decades to organise them against the threat of competition, including the Northern Union (1848) based in Newcastle.[23]

Following the Technical Instruction Act of 1889 and the Education Act of 1902, the work of technical education provided by mechanics' institutes was taken on as a responsibility of local councils and received government funding, with the focus moving from adult education to post-school students.[24] By 1920, mechanics'

institutes were being replaced by or re-founded as art and technical colleges, some of which reused the existing buildings. In other cases, the significant library collections amassed by the institutes were made available for public lending and the buildings reused as town libraries.[25] Stockdale observed in 1993 that at his time of writing various smaller mechanics' institutes in the North East, including Barnard Castle, Darlington, and Bishop Auckland, still existed by name but simply operated as social clubs.[26]

The buildings constructed by mechanics' institutes were seen to reflect the aspirational character of the movement itself in its desire for self-improvement. In 1850, the *Builder* discussed a 'Clubhouse for Literary and Scientific Bodies' with the comment that:

> ...it is a very evident fact that a beautiful building goes a long way in the adornment of a society with the character of responsibility and importance, and although it may not be entirely just to judge of a body of men by the appearance of the edifice in which they assemble, yet such judgement is, without doubt, frequently made.[27]

Mechanics' institutes did not adopt a unified style but did aim for their buildings to convey a sense of institutional grandeur. The most ambitious examples tended to be located in big cities, with fine examples surviving in Manchester and Liverpool, although smaller towns such as Burnley, Lancashire, could produce handsome buildings as well (Figure 3). Several early institute buildings adopted a robust classical style, such as Liverpool (1835) but also local examples, the Witham Testimonial, Barnard Castle (1846) and the Londonderry Institute, Seaham (1846), both in County Durham (Figure 4).[28] Such designs would have reinforced the movement's educational and spiritual foundation by evoking the culture of antiquity.[29] In the latter half of the 19th century, designs reflected the eclectic character of architecture in Victorian Britain, and might be Gothic, boldly Classical, Arts and Crafts or more experimental.[30] Leeds Mechanics' Institute (1860s) now Leeds City Museum, is a good example of the grandeur of larger institutes from this period, built in an ornate French Second Empire style (Figure 5). Small-town institutes were characteristically varied and employed various sorts of modest classical, Tudor, and simpler vernacular designs; the local people who spearheaded each institute tended to have more of an influence on style. The decline of the movement in the early 20th century meant that institutes never had the opportunity to experiment with the Art Nouveau, Art Deco or Modernist styles in the ways that other contemporary movements, such as Co-operation, went on to do.

Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute

The Mechanics' Institute on Victoria Avenue represents the final home of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, which had been founded over 50 years earlier. Having first operated from a room in the Market Place, the Institute purchased its first building in 1855, in Silver Street, and operated from that site between 1855

and 1879, during which time their buildings were completely rebuilt.[31] The move to Victoria Avenue and the construction of a new building was the result of efforts to give the Institute a fresh start after a period of decline in the 1870s.[32]

Figure 3: Manchester Mechanics' Institute, designed by J E Gregan, 1854-55 (© Stephen Richards and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic licence - geograph.org.uk/p/2756985)

Figure 4: Witham Testimonial Hall, Barnard Castle, designed by J & B Green, 1854 (© Jo Turner and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic licence - geograph.org.uk/p/3484090)

Matthew Richley places the Institute within his picture of the flourishing activity of Bishop Auckland in the early 1870s. Although his bias perhaps overemphasises its role in the town at the expense of other institutions, he nonetheless gives an impression of the state of the town in which it operated:

> Bishop Auckland is now the centre of a great industrial population, and has its iron roads running to all four quarters of the compass. Its two large banking establishments; its iron works; its Board of Health; its Mechanics Institute; its Music Hall and two weekly newspapers; its Town Hall; and its many business places rivalling some of the largest in the North of England, make up a picture of material prosperity and progress seldom equalled.[33]

According to Richley, an earlier institute in the town founded in 1828 'had a brief existence' (although he does not say when this organisation disbanded) and the new Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1847 with its initial meeting being held in the Society of Friends school-room located on the corner of Back-Way and Great Gates.[34] The founding members included Richley, who describes the inception meeting:

> A few friends of progress wishing to improve the intellectual condition of the town, met together in that place, and drew up a code

> of rules, and each lent a few volumes of books until the requisite funds were subscribed for the purchase of a few cheap and popular works as a nucleus for a permanent library.[35]

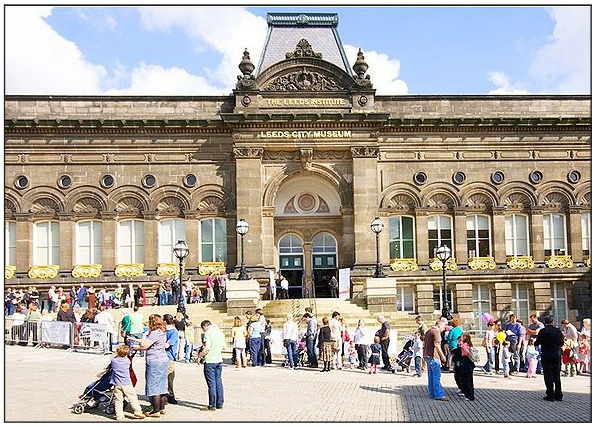

Figure 5: Leeds Museum, formerly the Mechanics' Institute, established 1819 (© Andrew Roberts and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence - commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leeds-city-museum.jpg)

Within the next year a room was taken in Market Place to serve for lectures, reading room and library, and Richley asserts that the initial 36 members rose to an average of 50 by 1850.[36] The Institute's activities were in line with the wider institutional objectives of moral and educational improvement. A report of January 1850 records that by that date it had assembled of a library of 150 books and periodicals; established a discussion and natural history class which had been discontinued; conducted an excursion to Redcar; and held their first series of Moral and Philosophical Lectures (winter 1849-1850, including topics of astronomy, geography, literature, and history).[37]

The enthusiasm surrounding the early years of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute is shown from an article in *The Darlington and Stockton Times*, reporting on the Institute's 'Soiree and Public Meeting' held at the assembly room of the Shepherd's Inn, Bishop Auckland, on New Year's Day 1850. In describing the musical activities and decorations of the room, the author writes:

> ...one would have supposed, on witnessing the cordiality and cheerfulness which prevailed throughout the whole of the meeting, that it was an assemblage of intimate friends rather than of persons whose only tie was a common interest in and desire to promote the welfare of a Mechanics' Institute...[38]

The meeting was chaired by the president of the Mechanics' Institute, William Hepple, a local solicitor, whose address set out the goals and situation of the Institute. Many such meetings were being held in the North East to promote the movement, after it had been reported by the Northern Union of Mechanics' Institutes that working-class men were failing to make use of the education they offered.[39] Hepple argued that the movement's goal was for men to improve their intellect to better understand their role in God's creation, and said that with 'the increase of population and of pecuniary means, the institution would increase in numbers and in usefulness'.[40] This was echoed by speeches given by local clergy

who emphasized personal improvement through education:

> What is worth knowing let everybody study. I would have every man acquainted with history and astronomy and geography... I would have people study their own frames that they may know what is good for them and what is injurious. I would have them study poetry and classic literature, and I even think every man should understand law and be his own lawyer [Rev Dawson].[41]

The Bishop Auckland Institute seems to have continued with a lecture series as the core of its activities, covering a wider range of artistic, literary and scientific subjects and exchanging its lecturing members with other local institutes to cover more topics.[42] The event held at the Shepherd's Inn in 1850 appears to have laid the basis of an annual Grand Soiree. A poster from a similar event on 12 July 1853 suggests a high-profile and vibrant itinerary, consisting of tea in a 'splendid new tent' in the Market Place followed by a public meeting with guest speeches and popular musical entertainment provided by the Durham Choral Society.[43] To mark the event, special train services were arranged at low fares from as far away as Middlesbrough and Darlington, local traders closed their shops at 1pm, and the Bishop of Durham offered free access to Auckland Castle Park for the public.[44]

Having operated from a rented room in Market Place for seven years, in 1855 the Mechanics' Institute acquired a building of its own in Silver Street, formerly a School of Industry owned by the Governors of Bishop Barrington's Charity.[45] The purchase was instigated by Hepple at a sum of £500, including the provision of a reading room and library, £100 of which was subscribed by the Darlington banker, Joseph Pease.[46] This delay in acquiring its own building was characteristic of the movement in the 1840s when small mechanics' institutes might aspire for a decade to erect permanent accommodation.[47] In 1860 the Institute hosted its first Polytechnic Exhibition in 'the large room connected with the building' followed by a second in the Town Hall in 1864, which were highly successful in a pecuniary point of view'.[48] These would have stemmed from the popularity of industrial and scientific exhibitions in the Victorian period, spearheaded by the Great Exhibition of 1851, providing opportunities for the public to see examples of contemporary design, invention and production up close. The Institute's increasing momentum determined that the existing building was insufficient for its requirements and it was agreed that purpose-built accommodation should be erected on the same site in Silver Street. Designs were procured and the new Silver Street building opened in June 1866.[49] The Institute is listed first among the town's Public Buildings in Matthew Richley's *The History and Characteristics of Bishop Auckland*, published in 1872, although this pre-eminence is biased by his own close involvement with the organisation. However, he records at that time the Institute had a membership of 200; a library of 1,200 volumes 'in every department of history, science and literature'; and a reading room 'supplied with the principal periodicals of the day, and a number of daily and weekly newspapers'.[50]

From the 1860s the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute began to reflect the

prevailing trend in the movement for institutes to move away from the educational endeavours that had been their hallmark in preceding decades, towards increased leisure and recreational provision, observed to be a dilution of the original spirit and intention of the movement to educate working men.[51] Shortly after the completion of the new Bishop Auckland Institute building in 1866, a 'gymnasium was also added behind the building, properly fitted up with swings, cross bars, and other requirements and a quoit ground prepared for the members'.[52] These were intended to provide leisure activities for men following strikes which had secured them shorter hours in the mines. In 1868, the Mechanics' Institute was recorded as the first place where billiards was played in Bishop Auckland and bagatelle had been introduced in 1864.[53] By the end of the following decade, however, these had taken over as the main activities of the Institute. *The Auckland Times and Herald* complained that the building was only used by young men who came to learn billiards and cards so they could show off their skills in the town's bars and halls and that this had driven away many of the Institute's oldest supporters.[54] An attempt had been made to assemble a museum in connection with the successful exhibitions, but although a collection of fossils and native birds had been gathered and display cases purchased, the effort failed due to the lack of interest amongst members.[55] In 1879 the treasurer was pelted with cinders during his addresses and a portrait of a former vice-president was upended on the wall. The Institute was suffering from general poor management and during the late 1870s the library had lost many of its best books; only 321 book loans were made that year, about 3 per member.[56]

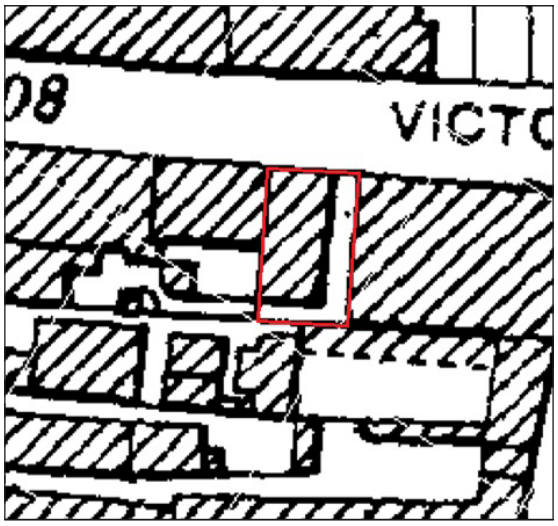

Figure 6: The Mechanics' Institute in circa 1897 showing the extension had not yet been added. Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map published in 1897, 1:2500 (© Crown Copyright and database rights 2019. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence Number 100019088)

It was decided that changes were needed to secure the future of the Institute and veteran members succeeded in passing the decision to relocate to a fresh site. An undated cutting from *The Auckland Times and Herald* in Richley's collection gives details of the construction of the new building and its opening. The Institute building in Silver Street was sold in 1879 for £700, £200 of which was used to pay off the mortgage and the remainder used to secure the new premises.[57] No sales particulars relating to this transaction were identified during documentary research at the Durham Record Office. A site on Victoria Street, now Victoria Avenue, was purchased from Mr Cleminson for £255, lying between his shop to the west and the Temperance Hall (now the Masonic Hall), built in the late 1870s, to the east.[58] Robert Wilkinson Thompson (1850-1896), based at 46 North Bondgate, a member of a local family of

architects, was appointed to produce plans for £21.[59] The Thompsons were active in Bishop Auckland from the mid-19th into the early 20th century spanning at least three generations. The approved design proposals for the Mechanics' Institute represent a somewhat eclectic blend of Gothic Revival detailing superimposed on a basic three-bay structure which corresponds to classical design principles of good proportions and regular fenestration. They were submitted on 2 January 1880, with tenders accepted a few months later.[60] Thompson's drawings (Figure 7) indicate that the buildings to the west of the Institute, containing Mr Cleminson's shop, pre-dated it and that it was built to abut the east end of them.

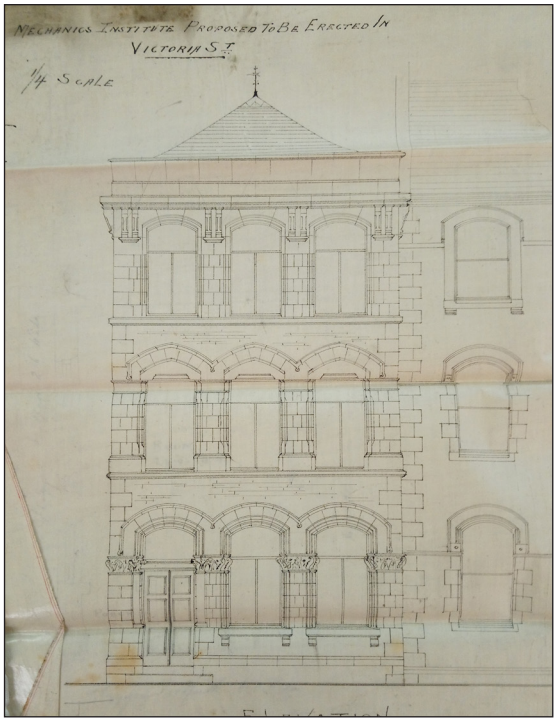

Figure 7: Proposed street elevation of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, as designed by R W Thompson, 1880 (UD/BA 432/489 Bishop Auckland Urban District Council. Reproduced with permission of Durham County Record Office (DRO))

Figure 8: Detail of the 1873 and 1880 sections of the Co-operative stores on Newgate Street, Bishop Auckland, designed by W V Thompson and R W Thompson (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Both Robert and his brother, William Vickers Thompson (1836-1888), independently designed extensions to the Co-operative Society Stores on Newgate Street (Listed Grade II, NHLE 1292114) (Figure 8). These have some of the same stylistic treatment as the Mechanics' Institute, employing loose Gothic detailing in an ordered arrangement of bays, although the Institute is a somewhat more successful design, using ornament to group the different windows of each floor. It is thought that the two brothers were in practice together, operating from an office in Market Square, but by the 1880s William was suffering from debt and

was investigated for bankruptcy in 1884-85.[61] In a broader context, it is also worth noting the design of the North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers, Newcastle, (1869-72) by Archibald Dunn which was executed in a Ruskinian Gothic style (Figure 9).[62] Although larger and more elaborate than the Bishop Auckland Institute, it was a grand local example of an institutional building, recently completed, from which to take inspiration.

Figure 9: The North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers, designed by Archibald Dunn, 1869-1872 (© Copyright Thomas Nugent and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license – geography.org.uk/p/1111333)

Various sources of funding were procured to recover the cost of the new building, with the Bishop of Durham donating a sum of £50.[63] In the second half of 1880, the Institute held a Polytechnic and Industrial Exhibition, at least their third, in Bishop Auckland Town Hall which raised a profit of £82-2s-1d in its run of five weeks and the outstanding costs were covered with a mortgage of £350.[64] In total the building cost £1,088-14s-4d, of which £823-82-10d was paid to the contractors and £14-5s-6d for the installation of gas fittings, of which some traces remain.[65] The structure comprised a large front room and smaller back room divided by a staircase on each floor with a WC on the ground and second floors and a basement coal cellar. The front rooms were to be used as the library (ground floor), newsroom (first floor), and billiards room (second floor) (the allocation of rooms is discussed in the fabric analysis below) (Figures 10 and 11).[66] A room for the resident caretaker was provided at the rear of the ground floor possibly as an office with his residence above.

Figure 10: The Mechanics' Institute on Victoria Avenue, Bishop Auckland (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Richley's undated cutting records only that the new Mechanics' Institute was opened on a Wednesday evening, presumably in 1880-1881. The opening was held in the library of the new building and attended by a large crowd including many of the town's clergy, professionals and tradesmen. The paper's reporter felt that:

> ...the institute, in both design and execution, ranks as one of the neatest structures in the town. Its handsome frontage presents a striking contrast to the old building, and it is to be hoped that the advantages in newspaper reading and periodical literature which it will afford, will present an equally strong contrast to the somewhat meagre supply at the old institute.[67]

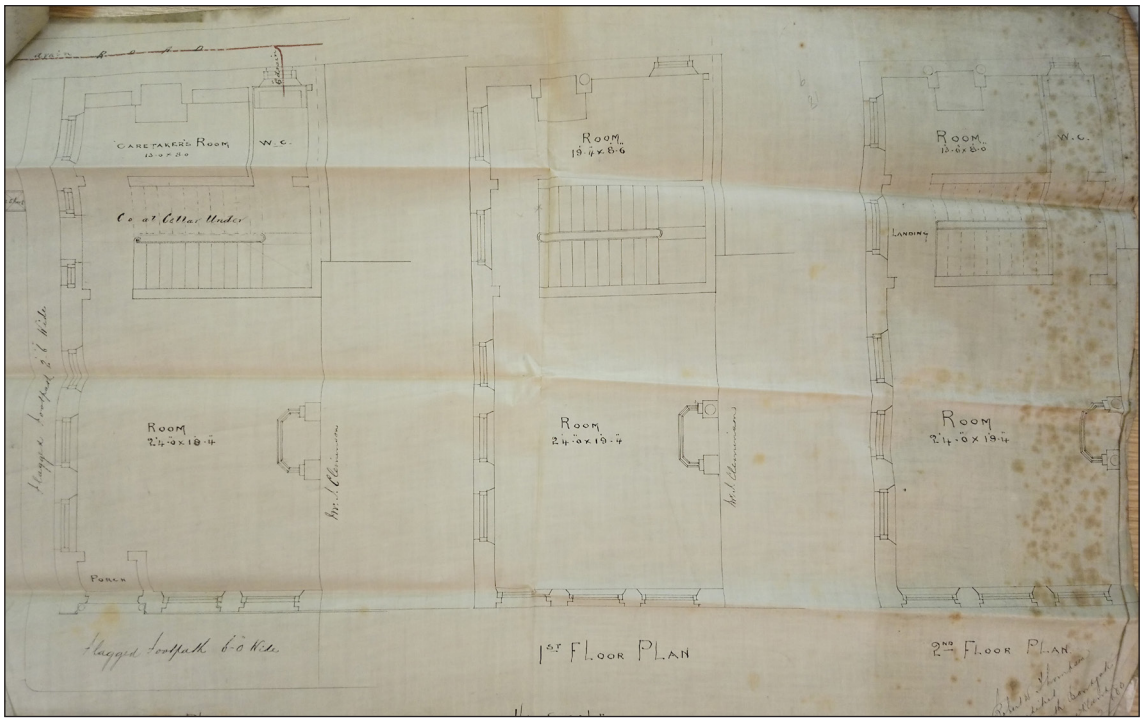

Figure 11: Proposed plans for the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, as designed by R W Thompson, 1880 (UD/BA 432/489 Bishop Auckland Urban District Council. Reproduced with permission of Durham County Record Office (DRO))

Speeches from committee officers and guest speakers chiefly reflected on the success of the Institute in erecting a new building amidst the challenges facing the mechanics' institute movement at the time, which had been losing the popularity enjoyed at its inception earlier in the century. In this vein, the president, Mr J Proud, expressed the committee's desire to forget the Institute's failure to achieve its potential in recent years and that the move to Victoria Street had freed them from their cramped and isolated former site near the Town Hall. He also noted the challenges to be faced by the Institute by the competition in the field of working-class education and improvement in Bishop Auckland and that they would have to rededicate their energies to their educative efforts.[68] Competition was such that the *Auckland Times and Herald* ran a whole series in early 1881 on 'Local Aids to

Culture', celebrating that

> ...there are few towns in the North of England with an equal number of inhabitants which can boast of having so many agencies at work for the moral and intellectual culture of its dwellers ... than Bishop Auckland.[69]

These included the Lightfoot (Church of England) Institute (Listed Grade II, NHLE 1297565) (Figure 12), Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association, independent science and art classes, Musical Society and Local Field Club. Many of the other speakers spoke to this effect, emphasising the importance of a strong library in the Institute and its return to educational principles. The opening concluded with a concert of popular music in the neighbouring Temperance Hall.

Figure 12: The Lightfoot Institute, Bishop Auckland, designed by R W Thompson (© Dave Bevis and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic licence - geograph.org.uk/p/3698508)

With the completion of the new building it was decided that further expenditure was needed to complete its furnishing. £100 was to be spent on new books to enhance the library and £60 was to provide new fittings for the members' rooms, including a new book-case for the reading room, to which £30 was contributed by the Darlington banking company, J Pease and Partners.[70] Following these improvements and the refreshing of the committee with new members, the *Herald* reported that the Institute was enjoying a three-fold increase in membership to 260 members, including the return of many old friends, and that annual book loans were into the thousands.[71] Despite this enterprising spirt, however, no evidence has been forthcoming to suggest that the Institute regained the success of its initial years.

As noted above, the new building was designed with accommodation for a live-in caretaker. The only space which is captioned on the original floor plan is the 'caretaker's room', located at the rear of the ground floor. The first caretaker is listed in the 1881 census as George Bradford, a gardener, who lived in the accommodation with his wife.[72] He was succeeded by Matthew Richley, acting as both caretaker and librarian, who is listed in the 1891 census along with his wife, Mary, and adult children.[73] There seem to have been alterations to the caretaker's accommodation during Richley's tenure as the census records a reduction of rooms

in the flat from four in 1891 to three in 1901.[74] This may relate to the construction of the bridged extension abutting the Masonic Hall (formerly the Temperance Hall) at first- and second-floor levels (discussed in more detail below), although this is not clearly present on the Ordnance Survey maps until 1980. The primary change created by this extension was the removal of the upper flights of the staircase (which Thompson's drawings from 1880 show was designed to rise the full height of the building) allowing for a single room extending the whole depth of the second floor, used for billiards and amusements (Figure 13). It may be that the lane running past the east of the building and along the back was required for access of some sort, meaning that the Institute had to leave a passage at ground-floor level, resulting in the archway bridge (Figure 14).[75]

Figure 13: The second-floor billiards room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 14: The passageway to the east of the Mechanics' Institute building (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

A further undated newspaper cutting in Richley's collection records an event which must have taken place after the building of the new Institute. This was the presentation at the Town Hall of portraits of Richley and Edward Hopper to the Institute by their subscribers.[76] The portraits had been commissioned from the Durham artist, Clement Burlison, who the report mentioned was himself a former member of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, and a collection of whose work is shown in Durham Town Hall at the time of writing (March 2019). Both the subjects had been founding members of the Institute (1847) and were noted in attendance at the opening of the new building in the 1880s, along with a Mr Calvert, as being amongst its strongest supporters. Hopper is recorded as a bookbinder and the Institute librarian in 1858 and had spoken on literary subjects for the Institute's lecture series.[77] Richley was by the 1880s renowned as the local historian having published *The History and Characteristics of Bishop Auckland* in 1872. He is

recorded as the librarian in *Kelly's Directory* of 1890 and in a letter from around this date to the committee of the Institute he reminded them that he had served 'in almost every capacity for forty years, [and] since then, I have served it faithfully as a servant for the last ten years (my Jubilee of service)'.[78] In his vote of thanks at the presentation of his portrait, Richley lamented the decline of the Institute since William Hepple's death (before 1872), advising the committee to continue attempting to revive a diverse lecture series.[79]

In December 1903 a meeting of the Institute agreed an up-to-date set of rules which were issued the following year to the Register of Friendly Societies to certify under 'An Act to exempt from County, Borough, Parochial and other Local Rates, Lands and Buildings occupied by Scientific or Literary Societies'.[80] This document gives details of the day-to-day operation of the Mechanics' Institute in Bishop Auckland. Its objects are defined as 'social intercourse, mutual helpfulness, mental and moral improvement, and rational recreation'.[81] However, in the copy held by Durham County Record Office these are crossed out and replaced with 'the promotion of Science, Literature and the Fine Arts – Exclusively', possibly reflecting the constant challenge of keeping the Institute rooted in its focus on education.[82]

At this time, three tiers of membership existed. The first comprised honorary members, elected at the Annual General Meeting for services rendered to the Institute, and annual subscribers paying a subscription of 10s or over. The remaining two tiers were annual subscribers of 6s and juniors under 16 years old subscribing for 4s. Junior members had no voting rights and were not permitted access to the billiards room.[83] Members could introduce guests who lived beyond five miles away from Bishop Auckland to the reading room for up to one month. The Institute committee was made up of president, two vice-presidents, treasurer and ten committee men who were re-elected annually and held monthly meetings.[84] They appointed a librarian to supervise the lending of their collection, and the resident caretaker. The Institute reading room was open daily from 8.30am to 10pm except on Sundays and the committee appointed particular days when the library itself was open for the exchange of books and periodicals; only one book and one periodical was permitted at a time. The rules dictate that it was the committee's role to select appropriate books 'in general literature and every department of science, history, and philosophy for the library excluding controversial works of politics or divinity'.[85] Any member could recommend for consideration books which he felt would enhance the library. The billiards room was open on the same days as the reading room, from 10am to 10pm.[86]

The 1903 rule book is the last known major source of information about the Institute. The early 20th century saw the decline of many mechanics' institutes with the formalisation of a national education system and many were reused as public libraries or as the basis for Further Education colleges. In 1913, the North Union of Mechanics' Institutes ceased operation although individual institutes continued to operate. In 1906, *Kelly's Directory* lists the committee of the Bishop Auckland Institute as: Thomas Blenkin, Hon Secretary; John Walton Wall, Librarian; Joseph Hall, Hon Treasurer; William Hewetson, Hon President and a library of

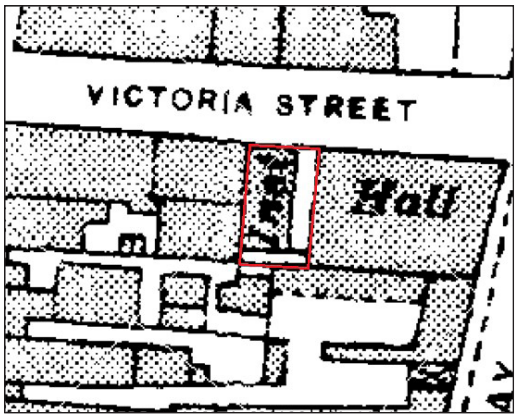

Figure 15: Extract from the Ordnance Survey Map published in 1939, 1:2500 (© Crown Copyright and database rights 2019. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence Number 100019088)

2,000 volumes.[87] The Institute in Bishop Auckland appears in a valuation record of *circa* 1911 as 'Mechanics' Institute and House', the building being valued at £1,226.[88] The census of the same year confirms John Walton Wall was residing in the Institute as caretaker and librarian with his wife and daughter.[89] The building is again listed in *Kelly's Directory* of 1914, noting its 'billiard, reading and amusement rooms, manager's quarters and a library of 3,000 volumes', a notably increased library collection.[90] Committee members are listed as: Thomas Blenkin, Hon President; W M Cooper, Hon Treasurer; S G Emmerson, Hon Secretary; Charles Stabler, Librarian. The censuses note that a caretaker was still resident as late as 1939, when the post was held by Johnathan Peacock (Figure 15).[91]

Figure 16: Caricature of Mr L S Seymour 'A Good Hand At The Game', circa 1931. One of several discovered in the building during the survey (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 17: Caricature of J A Stuart 'The Flying Scotsman', circa 1931. One of several discovered in the building during the survey (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

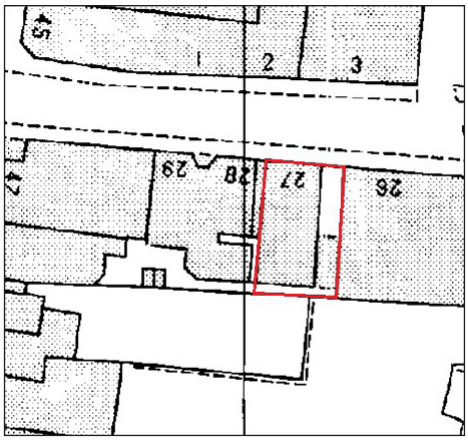

Figure 18: The Mechanics' Institute in 1980 showing the bridge extension. Extract from the Ordnance Survey Map published in 1897, 1:2500 (© Crown Copyright and database right 2019. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence Number 100019088)

It is unclear when the Mechanics' Institute ceased to operate as such in Bishop Auckland. Communication with local historians in the preparation of this report indicates that it still functioned in some capacity in the 1950s and 1960s, but that by then it was primarily a social club where billiards could be played.[92] Several of the caretakers' account books were noted during the site survey, listing charges from members and dating from the early years of the 20th century, but these have not been consulted and remain in the building. The survey also revealed a series of caricature portraits of the Institute presidents, surviving in their frames, which are an important social record of its continued activity (Figures 16 and 17). A similar record entitled '50 Billiard Room Celebrities', a postcard from 1935, gives further testimony to the longstanding use of the building for recreational activities (Figure 19). The Goad insurance maps from the late 20th century vary in marking the site 'vacant' (1984; 2003) and 'Mechanics' Institute' (1989; 1995) and the most recent map (2007) marks it as in use as a charity shop called 'Ruchez'.[93]

Figure 19: '50 Billiard Room Celebrities', 1935 (Reproduced with permission. From the collection of Tom Hutchinson)

Timeline of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute

1823 – First Mechanics' Institute founded in Glasgow shortly followed by London

1828 – Founding of original Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute

1847 – First meeting of new Mechanics' Institute held in the Friends' School-room, Backway

1848 – Northern Union of Mechanics' Institutes founded

circa 1848 – Room taken in the town hall for reading room, library and lectures

1849-1850 - First known Mechanics' Institute's lecture series

1850, Jan – First known annual Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute Grand Soiree

1850, Nov – 1850, Jan – Lecture series

1854 – Lecture series

1855 – Site on Silver Street bought from Bishop Barrington's Charity and new building constructed on the same site

1860 – First Polytechnic Exhibition

1864 – Second Polytechnic Exhibition held in the town hall

1865 – Committee decides existing building is insufficient due to expansion of Institute. Plans for new building prepared

1866, June – New building opened

1866 – Gymnasium added to rear of the Silver Street Mechanic's Institute

1868 – First introduction of billiards to Bishop Auckland at the Mechanics' Institute

1880 – Re-establishment of Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute. New premises built at Victoria Street

1903, Dec – Rules of the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute

1913 – Northern Union of Mechanics' Institutes closes

1984 – Building listed as vacant

1989 – Building listed as Mechanics' Institute

1995 - Building listed as Mechanics' Institute

2003 – Vacant Outlet

2007 – Temporary use as Ruchez Charity Shop

2015 – Fire damages much of the first floor

3 DESCRIPTION OF HISTORIC FABRIC

The Mechanics' Institute, built in 1880, is a three-bay three-storey building, facing north and street-fronted onto Victoria Avenue in Bishop Auckland. It occupies a narrow rectangular site abutting a three-storey building to the west now in use as a post office.[94] To the east an alleyway leads from Victoria Avenue, passing below an archway carrying two upper floors, to a narrow passageway to the rear which gives access to the back of other properties further west and is separated by a high brick wall from vacant land further to the south. The two storeys above the archway abut a two-storey former Temperance Hall to the east dating from *circa* 1876 now in use as the Bishop Auckland Masonic Hall.

Figure 20: Front elevation of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Externally, the three-bay volume fronting the street is the result of a single phase of building, following the designs of Robert Wilkinson Thompson, discussed above (Figure 20). Possibly around 1900, a further phase of work was undertaken comprising the archway with two-storey extension above, and internal alterations involving the removal of the upper part of the staircase and insertion of a new staircase in a different location, and the reorganisation of the second floor into a single room used for billiards and amusements. The elevations are constructed in sandstone except to the rear where the walling is red brick. Most, if not all, the windows across the building are late 19th-century originals. The interior is filled with a mixture of stock from commercial use in the early-21st century and some objects and memorabilia dating from the building's use as the Mechanics' Institute. Internal room arrangements still reflect the general arrangement seen on Thompson's plans of a single principal room per floor, although there has been some sub-division of rooms on the first floor in addition to the changes made to the second floor mentioned above.

Exterior

The street elevation of the Mechanics' Institute is constructed of squared-and-snecked sandstone with quoins flanking both sides of the elevation, ashlar dressings and deeply recessed door and window openings. The main three-bay volume is almost exactly as designed by Thompson in 1880, with only small embellishments to the label mouldings of the windows being absent as built.

On the ground floor, a chamfered plinth extends across the width of the building. The entrance doorway, located on the east side of the street elevation, is approached by two sandstone steps and has inset half-height stone dwarf colonettes. These have foliate capitals which form part of a carved string extending across the façade between openings. A segmental-headed plain-glazed fanlight is located above the door and is separated from it by a moulded transom. The fanlight pattern is repeated on the two window bays to the west, with roll-moulded reveals which are faced by a smooth frieze surmounted by a moulded string following the line of the segmental arches. The frieze contains the word 'MECHANICS' over the doorway, '1880' over the central window, and 'INSTITUTE' over the west window, incised into the stonework (Figure 21). The two windows have projecting stone sills carried on carved consoles and the painted timber entrance door consists of two inward opening three-panel leaves.

Figure 21: Name and date stones above the entrance of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

At first-floor level, a moulded sill course spans the elevation with three square-headed window openings above. Each window lintel forms a smooth tympanum recessed below a smooth-faced shallow-pointed arched frieze with roll-mouldings that follows the line of the arches surmounted by a label moulding (Figure 22). At second-floor level, the three segmental-headed window openings sit on a continuous moulded sill course and have simple splayed jambs and roll-moulded heads. Flanking each window, pairs of moulded stone consoles carry a projecting cornice above which is a plain parapet surmounted by a moulded coping (Figure 23). All windows on the front elevation are painted timber plain-glazed casements consisting of two vertical lights below a transom with a single light above. Circular iron pattress plates have been introduced at first and second-floor levels and steel tie rod retaining plates can be seen on the rear elevation, presumably to prevent bulging of the elevation.

Figure 22: Second-floor window of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 23: Detail of cornicing and eaves brackets of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Thompson's proposals show that the east elevation was designed to be fully detached from the pre-existing Masonic Hall (then the Temperance Hall) (*see* Figures 7 and 11]). This elevation was constructed in uncoursed rubble stonework with plain ashlar sandstone sills and lintels to the window openings, segmental at ground and second floor and square-headed at first floor (Figure 24). The fenestration on this elevation originally comprised five openings per floor, with the three northernmost windows placed to light the principal room on each floor, the

fourth bay was aligned with the staircase and the fifth window was placed to light the smaller rooms to the rear. The surviving casement windows here are similar to those on the front elevation. On the ground floor is a secondary entrance (the second opening from the south) consisting of a segmental-headed central doorway flanked by tall narrow segmental-headed sidelights with plain ashlar lintels, side jambs and sills (Figure 25). Thompson's plans show that this opened directly onto the foot of the staircase. It was presumably intended both as a service entrance (the ground-floor plans show this area at the back of the ground floor lay over a coal cellar) and as a private entrance for the caretaker whose flat formed the rear rooms of each floor in the 19th-century layout (see discussion on interiors below) (Figure 26).

Figure 24: Front (north) and east elevations of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 25: Secondary (alleyway) entrance of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Sometime after the completion of Thompson's 1880 building the archway bridge extension was built between the east elevation and the Masonic Hall (Figure 27). The execution of this extension so closely follows the 1880 building in terms of construction and the form of windows, suggesting that it was constructed not much later than the original building. It is proposed that this work was undertaken *circa* 1900 as census records in 1891 and 1901 record a change in room numbers which indicate that alterations had taken place.[95] The north elevation of the archway bridge is also constructed of uncoursed rubble stonework with two square-headed window openings to the first floor and one to the second floor, all following the

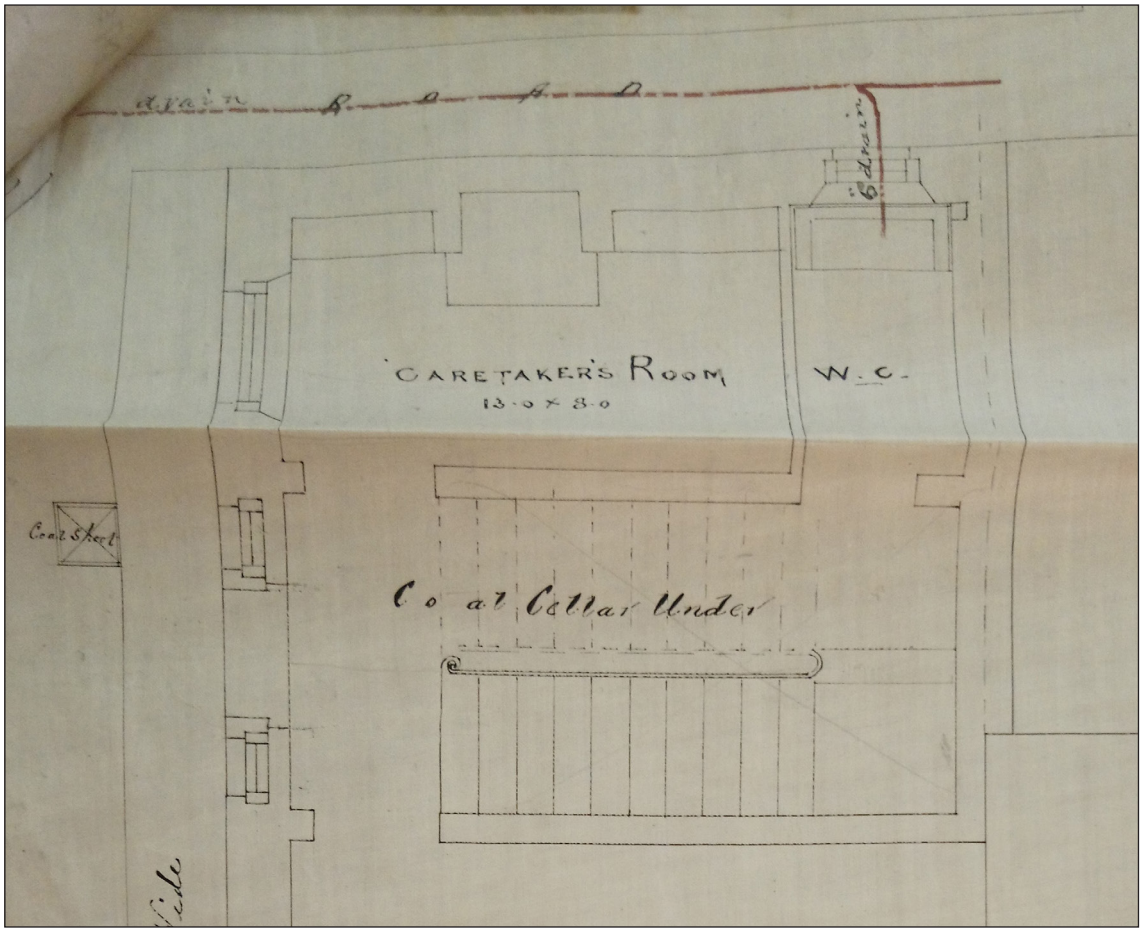

Figure 26: Proposed ground-floor plan for the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, designed by R W Thompson, 1880 (UD/BA 432/489 Bishop Auckland Urban District Council © Durham County Record Office (DRO))

detailing of those on the original east elevation. Below the first-floor windows is a shallow segmental sandstone arch with chamfered edges and hood moulding carried on plain moulded corbels to the east and west sides (Figure 28).

The alleyway which runs below the arch is surfaced with the original stone flags along the foot of the wall noted on Thompson's plans to a width of 2'6", beside which runs a stone gutter. The coal shoot marked on the plans is still visible in the alley (now blocked up with cinder blocks) immediately south of the door opening. The rest of the alley appears to have been largely resurfaced with concrete. It is closed at the north end by wrought-iron gates, the gate to the west spanning the flagged pavement and the wider one to the remaining width. The gate runner of the west gate remains inset into the surfacing beneath (Figure 29).

The south elevation of the main building is constructed in red brick laid in English Garden Wall bond, of five stretcher courses between header courses, with plain sandstone quoins flush with the brickwork on the corners (Figure 30). The south side of the archway bridge is also constructed in red brick with an arch of brick

Figure 27: View of the alleyway bridge of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 28: Detail of the brackets on the underside of the bridge (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 29: Detail of the gates and alleyway entrance of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 30: Rear elevation of the Mechanics' Institute from the brownfield site to the south (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

voussoirs resting on ashlar stone kneelers which bear on fluted stone corbels. The soffit of the archway is level lath and plaster. On the archway bridge, the bricks are laid in simple stretcher courses and are of a slightly different colour and texture to those of the main volume. This suggests, alongside the fact that the archway is fitted between the external side of the main building's quoins and west wall of the Masonic Hall, that the insertion of the bridge took place at a later date. At the west side of the rear elevation, on the ground and first floor, are single square-headed window openings each with plain sandstone sills and lintels and containing 19th-century two-over-two painted timber casements. On the second floor, a pair of segmental-headed windows, also with sandstone sills and lintels below the central brick chimneystack, the upper portion of which has been rebuilt (probably in the late 20th century) in smooth red brick and is capped with three louvred clay chimney pots (Figure 31). The west elevation of the main building, where it projects behind the adjoining building, has at ground-floor level one square-headed window opening with sandstone lintel and sill. This opening has been blocked with concrete blocks.

Figure 31: Detail of the rear roof and second floor of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

The building's plan is 'L'-shaped, including the archway bridge, and the roof is hipped with roll-top angled clay ridge tiles and slated slopes. The front hip drains to a parapet gutter, the east and south slopes to half-round cast-iron gutters and the west slope to a cast-iron box gutter. The 1880 roof was originally a simple rectangle on plan with ridge and hips, and a large part of this roof structure is presumed to survive over the main volume, although it has not been possible to undertake an inspection of the roof as part of this investigation. With the construction of the archway bridge, the roof in the south-east corner must have been reorganised and extended to provide a new hipped projection. This change is clearly evident from the brownfield site to the south of the Mechanics' Institute where the top of the original ridge and hip line can be seen (*see* Figure 31). It was also probably at this time that the timber-framed raised lantern (pitched parallel to the main roof slopes) was added to the centre of the ridge on the main roof (Figure 32). Although Thompson's proposals do not include a roof plan, each floor plan contains an internal wall around the centre of the building to partition off the staircase, suggesting that this roof lantern was not part of the original building (*see* Figure 11). If the roof light was original, it would have had room partitions cutting across the space below it which seems a very poor design solution. Furthermore, the roof light extends its length north to south and not east to west as would be expected if it was indeed associated with the original staircase arrangement. At the time of the extension the upper stairs were relocated to create a larger billiard room on the second floor and so the lantern may have been installed to improve lighting to the billiard tables.

Figure 32: Detail of the parapet and roof lantern of the Mechanics' Institute (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Interior

The interior of the main building as designed by Thompson originally comprised a single principal room per floor with smaller rooms to the rear separated by the staircase which rose the full height of the building (*see* Figure 11). The report on the opening of the Mechanics' Institute from *The Auckland Times and Herald* states that the three principal rooms were to be used as a billiards and amusements room, library and newsroom.[96] Thompson's plans do not indicate the allocation of uses in his designs, each is simply marked 'Room 24.0 x 19.4', and there is no known fabric evidence to distinguish which was which. It may be that the billiard room was always on the second floor and that it was simply expanded when it became clear that this was a popular, if controversial, aspect of the Institute's activities (see above). The arrangement of the other two rooms is suggested by the Institute's rule book from 1903 which notes that while the reading room was open daily, the library was only open on certain days for the exchange of material.[97] Given that the front lobby enters directly into the large ground-floor room, this must have been the reading room (open daily) through which the staircase was accessed, while the library (open less frequently) may have been on the first floor where it could be opened or locked independently while still allowing access up to the second-floor billiards room.

Internal doors throughout the building are generally four panel with stop-chamfered stuck mouldings. In the principal rooms, architraves are moulded and terminate on plinth blocks and skirtings are built up and moulded.

Figure 33: View of the ground-floor front room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Ground floor

The ground floor is entered through a square lobby from the main entrance in the north elevation. The lobby has a polychromatic tiled floor and lime plastered walls and ceiling. Within, the main front room has a timber boarded floor, plain plastered walls and a late-20th century suspended ceiling, set just above the tops of the segmental-arched windows, above which can be seen the original ceiling and its moulded cornice (Figure 33). The east and north walls are clad with vertical timber sheeting, probably dating to *circa* 2000, behind which can be seen evidence of an earlier wallpaper over anaglypta dado lining (Figure 34). The skirtings and architraves are moulded timber. The window reveals in this room have plain plaster splays with roll-mouldings at the interface with the main walling and contain

segmental-headed windows with inward-opening bottom-hung casements (Figure 35). The windows on the east wall are covered by inset timber sheets and are blocked externally by steel sheets. A fireplace, shown on Thompson's plan, has been removed from the chimneybreast on the west wall.

Figure 34: Detail of the hall doorway (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 35: Internal detail of ground-floor window (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 36: View down the staircase from the first-floor half-landing (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

A flush door on the east side of the south wall leads to the side entrance hallway from which a timber staircase rises to the first floor via a half-landing (Figure 36). The walls here are plastered and the ceiling has a simple moulded cornice. The staircase has wooden treads and risers, closed strings, spindle moulded balustrades in a cruciform pattern, substantial moulded handrail and square decorative newel posts with turned features and moulded finials (Figure 37). The staircase originally rose through the building to the second floor but, at the time of construction of the alleyway bridge (proposed as *circa* 1900) the upper flights were removed in order to create the second-floor billiards room which now extends to the full depth of the main building. The exposed edge of the landing, where the upper staircase has been removed, is closed by a much simpler short balustrade (Figure 38).

The ground-floor room to the south of the staircase has been reconfigured from the late 19th-century arrangement designed by Thompson. Although the door into the staircase hall remains in the same place today, his plans show a small rectangular room labelled 'Caretaker's Room 13.0 x 8.0' with a central chimneypiece and lit by the southerly window in the east wall (*see* Figure 26). Outside the room, in the hall, a corridor ran beneath the return flight of stairs opening into a small WC in the south-west corner, and possibly accessing another flight of stairs leading down

Figure 37: Detail of newel posts on the mezzanine landing (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 38: The first-floor landing with the altered stairs continuing to the second floor in the extension behind (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 39: View of the ground-floor rear room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 40: View of the first-floor glazed and timber lobby (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

to the coal cellar. Today, however, the east end of this corridor has been closed and the area of the corridor and WC incorporated into the former Caretaker's Room to form a single space. Although the fireplace has been removed, the central location of the chimneybreast indicates that it was either relocated to be central to the new larger room at the time these alterations took place or that the proposed plans were not executed (Figure 39). The recess shown to the east of the chimneybreast on Thompson's drawings is closed with a late-20th century timber partition and door. A cupboard door in the north-west corner may still access basement stairs but this was not accessible for investigation.

First floor

At first-floor level, a four-panel door on the north side of the landing leads to the front room via a crudely inserted glazed and timber lobby around the window closest to the door (Figure 40). This front room has suffered extensive fire and smoke damage, although the original lime wall plaster, lath-and-plaster ceiling and moulded cornicing survive substantially intact (Figures 41 and 42). The area south of the chimneybreast has also been partitioned off and is entered independently from the lobby. A stone fireplace surround survives on the chimneybreast projecting from the west wall, with flanking jambs containing inscribed circular bulls eyes and a substantial bull-nosed mantle (Figure 43). The firebox opening is blocked with timber boarding and contains an inserted late 20th-century electric fire. Again, there is no indication of the use of the room, but its size, decoration and first-floor position overlooking the street suggests it was the principal room in the building, perhaps the Institute library. The description of the opening of the Institute records that the gathering was held in the library which suggests that this room doubled up as a meeting or lecture room as well. [98]

Figure 41: Detail cornicing and first-floor window (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 42: View of first-floor front room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 43: Detail of first-floor front room fireplace (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 44: View of first-floor landing looking to the rear rooms (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 45: View of first-floor south-west room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 46: View of first-floor south-east room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

To the south of the landing, a four-panel door opens into a short corridor which leads to a room in the south-west corner of the main building and another room at the back of the archway bridge beneath the flight of stairs to the second floor (Figure 44). The landing door has a plaque reading 'Office/Enquiries' and appears to date from the mid-20th century, indicating that the rooms had an administrative use, at least towards the end of the Institute's life. Both rooms have plain plastered walls and lath-and-plaster ceilings in very poor condition and the windows in each room are blocked with timber boards. The south-west room has a simple painted slate fireplace with consoled mantle but the condition of the room prevented further investigation (Figure 45). These rooms may have formed part of the caretaker's flat which was located within the Institute building. As noted above, the room in the archway bridge contains a series of the caretaker's account books from the mid-20th century as well as several portraits of Institute presidents (Figure 46). These and the door plaque suggest that some sort of caretaker remained in charge of the running of the building, although it is unclear whether they were still resident.

Figure 47: View of first-floor alleyway bridge landing looking into the small room to east (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

From the main landing four steps lead up through an opening in the east wall into the archway bridge extension. A smaller landing with a door on its east side opens into a small room, each lit by a single timber casement window, boarded up on the inside (Figure 47). A gas mantle is mounted on the south wall of the small room suggesting that the building was lit by gas from an early stage (Figure 48). The opening from the main landing is likely to be an original window, lowered to provide an entrance from the landing into the extension.

Second floor

The staircase in the archway bridge between the first and second floors is presumed to have been inserted to compensate for the top two flights of the original staircase which were removed to create extra space in the second floor of the 1880 building (Figure 49). Rising from the small first-floor landing, the replacement staircase has a moulded timber bannister rail and is enclosed by walls to the east and west which bear evidence of stencilled geometric decoration under later peeling paint (Figure 50). At the top of the stairs is a small landing lit by a two-light casement window (now boarded over). To the east it opens into a small toilet lit by another two-light casement (also boarded) having a timber panelled door and moulded architrave and containing a high-level cistern.

Figure 48: Detail of gas sconce in small room in archway bridge (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 49: View of archway bridge staircase from second floor (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 50: Detail of stencilled geometric wall decoration on second-floor staircase (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 51: View of window and internal panelling in billiard room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 52: External view of central second-floor window and vent (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

To the west, the landing rises two steps to the billiards room which retains two full-sized billiard tables and spans the full depth of the 1880 building (*see* Figure 13). Again, the doorway from the staircase is likely to have been formed from a former window which, on Thompson's plans, lit a small room behind the original staircase that presumably formed part of the caretaker's flat. The billiards room seems to have been refitted in the late 20th century with imitation timber-sheet material lining the walls and the installation of a suspended ceiling (Figure 51). The sheeting has also been applied to the lower casements of several of the windows, leaving only the upper pane open, and the opening of the central window facing north onto the street has been completely blocked with sheeting and a ventilation fan inserted which is visible from the exterior (Figure 52). Evidence of an earlier painted anaglypta dado lining can be seen behind the wall sheeting in places and original moulded skirtings can be seen below. The anaglypta lining must itself be a replacement scheme, possibly dating from the reconfiguring of the room *circa* 1900, as the product was only manufactured from 1887.[99] The suspended ceiling has largely collapsed and the original lath-and-plaster ceiling can be seen above, deeply coved to all four sides (Figure 53). The centrally placed rectangular-plan roof lantern, noted above, has been sheeted over, but two open hatches offer some view into it from below (Figure 54). Moulded octagonal panels located on the north-south central axis of the ceiling to either side of the lantern possibly mark the position of light fixtures, although no surviving cabling is visible, and later ceiling fittings are visible elsewhere. The coving of the ceiling around the whole of the space must date from the room's enlargement, and it is unclear whether this was expanded from a ceiling in the 1880 front room, or whether it was a completely

Figure 53: View of second-floor ceiling above 20th-century suspended ceiling (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 54: Internal detail of roof lantern (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

new scheme. As discussed above, given that the lantern is centrally placed, it must have been at the same time as the enlargement of the second floor. Thompson's plans indicate there was previously a wall below where the lantern is now located, dividing off the staircase.

Figure 55: Detail of billiard room fireplace (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 56: View of billiard room looking to south wall showing added window (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

On the west wall the chimneybreast contains a substantial stone fireplace identical to that in the room below (Figure 55). Upholstered banquettes line the remainder of the west wall. Central on the south wall is a second chimneybreast[100] flanked by two windows boarded up but externally retaining the remains of timber casements (Figure 56). These indicate further changes which also probably date to the rearrangement of the second-floor room. On Thompson's plan, the small rear room behind the staircase does not span the full width of the building and its chimneybreast is central to the room itself (Figure 57). In the south-east corner a corridor ran behind the staircase to a WC lit by a window in the south wall. With the removal of the staircase, the rear room, WC and corridor were also removed and the chimneybreast relocated to the centre of the south wall, while a second window was opened to the east of it to form a symmetrical arrangement. Both windows are now blocked with timber boards.

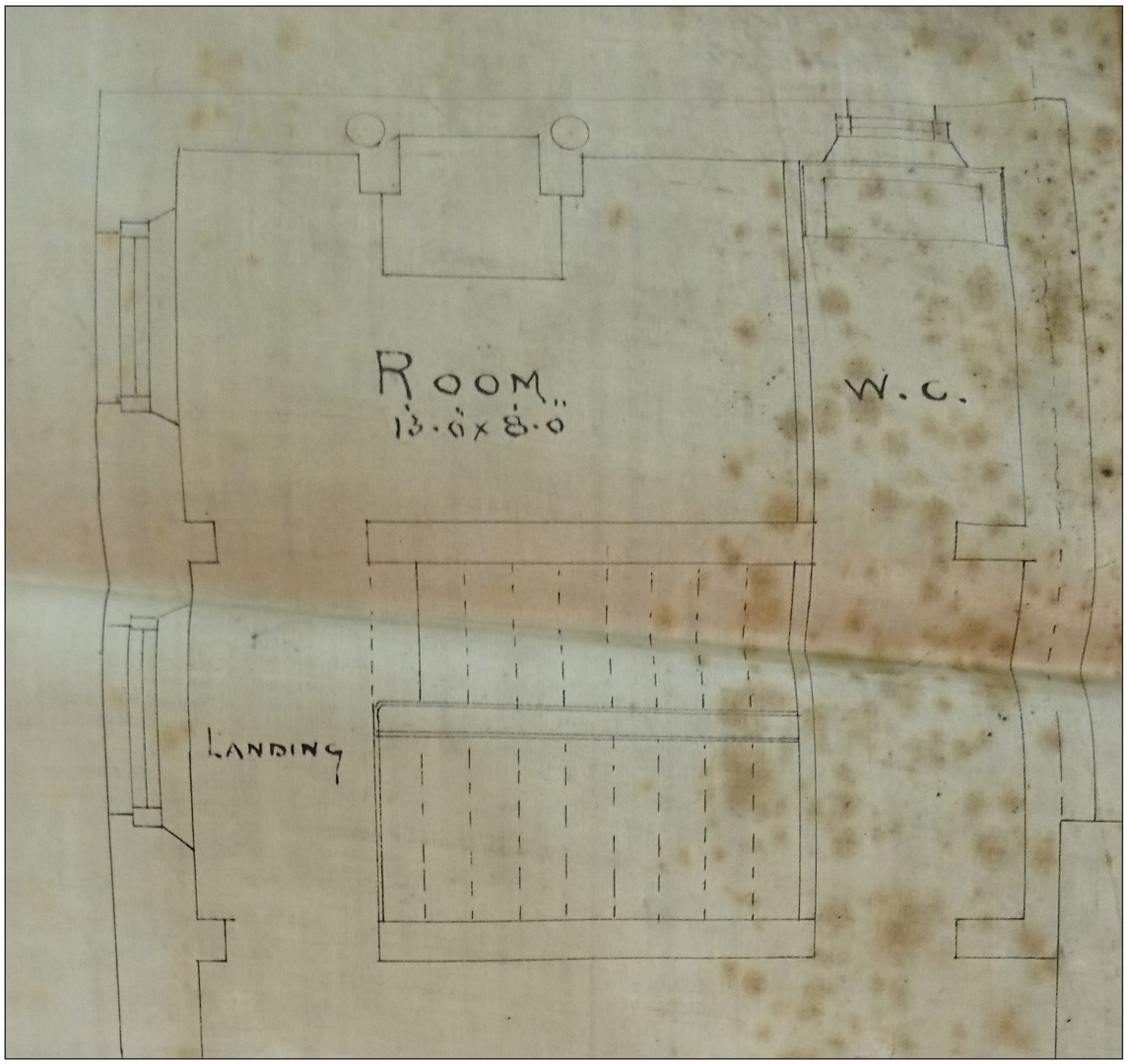

Figure 57: Proposed second-floor plan for the Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute, designed by Detail of R W Thompson, 1880 (UD/BA 432/489 Bishop Auckland Urban District Council. Reproduced with permission of Durham County Record Office (DRO))

In the east wall of the billiards room, a doorway leads to a toilet containing a glazed vitreous clay corner urinal behind a timber modesty screen (Figure 58). This toilet and the one off the landing must have been installed to compensate for the loss of the 1880 toilet in the south-west corner of the second floor. To the south of this space, another door opens into what appears to have been a cloakroom which retains its coat hooks and shelving (Figure 59).

Figure 58: View into second-floor toilets and cloak room lobby (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

Figure 59: Detail of coat racks and hangers in second-floor cloak room (© Historic England, photograph: Alastair Coey Architects 2019)

4 STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Evidential

The Bishop Auckland Mechanics' Institute remains a substantially intact example of a modest Victorian educational institution with a roughly-dated later extension that complements the character of the original late-19th century building. Both interior and exterior are evidence of a largely unchanged purpose-built building, constructed in a single primary phase in 1880 and retaining a large amount of late 19th-century interior details and external ornament. The street elevation retains both a date-stone and the name of the institution.

The building represents the growth of the mechanics' institute movement in the late 19th century nationally, which saw institutes erected in smaller industrial towns such as Bishop Auckland as well as cities. Constructed after the movement's building boom (1852-1873) it is a late example of a compact, small-town institute, representing the importance of grand buildings in the movement's aspirations. The inclusion of reading room, library and games room, the latter still identifiable through its furnishings, is typical of such institutions in the 19th century, and makes clear the combination of leisure and self-improvement which was characteristic of the movement, especially in later years.

The building retains a largely united scheme of modest late Victorian interiors with good quality examples of joinery, cornicing, fireplaces and staircase, as well as original doors and windows. The significance of these interiors is threatened by their poor condition in places following fire damage. It is possible that the building may contain further evidence of internal alterations to the top floor and staircase in relation to the added bridge section. A small amount of evidence of historic gas lighting fittings enhances understanding of the historical functioning of the building, as do the billiard tables surviving on the top floor which are important evidence of the building's continued use in the 20th century.

Evidential value is significantly enhanced by the existence of the original proposed building plans by Robert Wilkinson Thompson dating from 1880 which confirm that the original volume remains substantially as-built in plan and elevations. Further significance is obscured by the lack of historical evidence for the building's uses and development, as almost all details about the Institute's activities relate to previous iterations of their buildings, not to this site. However, there is considerable potential for this to be uncovered from the caretakers' logs observed in the building during the survey.

Historical

The building is a good example of a modest purpose-built mechanics' institute which reflects the provision on a local level of characteristic aspects of the

movement's educational offering, focusing on the reading room and library with recreational activities offered in the games room with connections to a network of institutes across the North East, overseen by the Northern Union in Newcastle. The building has a strong association with the wider mechanics' institute movement which was part of the wider labour movement in industrial Britain, reflecting the progress towards increased rights and welfare for the working classes in the late 19th century. It has a strong connection to the local mining communities which were the life-force of local industry, the railway network and other working-class communities in Bishop Auckland for whom the institutes were established.

Through the host of local men who served the Institute and gave lectures, it is also reflective of the success of these local people in assembling educational programmes for their peers. Its exhibitions and short-lived museum likewise speak of the Victorian ideals of learning through collections and the display of industrial and scientific prowess. The building complements other institutional buildings which are representative of shifting Victorian ideals in terms of improved conditions and aspirations for the working classes, including the Lightfoot Institute, Kingsway (Listed Grade II, NHLE 1297565; also designed by R W Thompson), and the former Co-operative Stores, Newgate Street (Listed Grade II, NHLE 1292114). It reflects the continued expression of architectural grandeur to suggest the aspirational principles of the movement, enhanced by the specifics of its construction as a fresh start for the declined Institute in Bishop Auckland. This is reflected especially in the carefully designed and ornamented street façade which is, on a small scale, typical of the grand institutional buildings that many mechanics' institutes constructed in the late 19th century and their ability to erect a substantial building in both urban and rural centres.

It also has a particularly strong association with Mathew Richley who remains an important historical figure in Bishop Auckland for his published history of the town. Richley's papers provide key information about the history of the Institute and especially the 1880 building, and he was a longstanding committee member and later librarian living in the building, and as a result he witnessed the successes and failures of the Institute. The details he provides of past activities during the Institute's earlier years before moving to Victoria Avenue, yield a rich picture of the programmes of education, events and annual festivities which embedded the Mechanics' Institute's position as a prominent social body in Bishop Auckland.

Designed over a single phase with the addition of a bridging addition possibly *circa* 1900, the building is representative of the work of Robert Wilkinson Thompson (1850-1896) and provides a strong contribution to the status of the Thompson family as architects active in Bishop Auckland during the 19th and 20th centuries. He is known to have designed two additions to the Co-operative Stores, Newgate Street, in 1882-83, where his brother William Vickers Thompson (1836-1888) also executed work, and to have designed the Lightfoot Institute on Kingsway *circa* 1890. Their father, William Thompson (1810-1858) was probably the designer of St Anne's Church beside the town hall in Bishop Auckland (Listed Grade II; NHLE 1292201), while Robert's son, Robert Brown Thompson (1878-1929), was also an

architect and made alterations to McIntyre's Shoe Shop (Listed Grade II, NHLE 1196577) on Newgate Street.

Aesthetic

The Mechanics' Institute is a good example of Victorian eclecticism, composed according to classical design principles, embellished with Gothic detailing and having simple internal furnishings. Its execution is indicative of the varied stylistic approaches to the design of mechanics' institutes, which included the more modest provincial designs of small-town architects. The frontage makes a positive contribution to the quality of the urban environment streetscape, harmonising with the neighbouring buildings, but this value is reduced by the secluded location of the building, easily overlooked, on a side street off Newgate Street. Its formal design character provides an aesthetic contrast with the simpler historic retail buildings and shopfronts in the vicinity and especially complements the style of the neighbouring Masonic Hall.
The building presents a harmonious architectural character and its only major alteration, the two-storey bridge extension, complements this significance, the unknown architect having taken pains to include an archivolt moulding and brackets which follow the style of the original building. The street frontage represents a carefully designed elevation with a visible unity to each storey and the ornamental focus on the ground floor. Internally, significance is reduced by the poor condition of the interior including areas of fire damage, and obscured by the addition of suspended ceilings. However, the survival of historic architraves, window frames, staircase, ceiling plasterwork, niches, ornamental billiards table, and fireplaces speak of the simple yet formal character of the rooms.

Communal

The Mechanics' Institute existed to engage local people in education and has strong links to wider movements for self-improvement and suffrage for the working classes. The building represents the Victorian principles of industry and education, social conscience and philanthropy which were at the heart of the mechanics' institute movement. Although the building is not physically prominent, its longstanding existence in Bishop Auckland across three central sites and its record of prominent public events, firmly roots it in town memory as a place of membership, learning and social activity.

The variety of activities available at the Mechanics' Institute and their events hosted elsewhere in Bishop Auckland represent the social involvement of the movement through education and public activity. The success of its early lecture programmes and public exhibitions, along with the longevity of its library and reading room, indicate the success of the Institute in its contribution to learning in Bishop Auckland. Its importance as a local institution is reflected in the colourful reports of its annual soirees, the opening of the new institute building, and the presentation of

portraits of long-serving members.

It is also of value as a place representing the spirit of self-directed learning, prior to the increase of national education curricula and examinations. The Institute was largely reliant on its own members and those of neighbouring Institutes to formulate and present is lectures and classes to their peers. The surviving records of lecture schedules are testament to the breadth and range of what they were able to offer, representing the ingenuity of Victorian social reform movements in working independently for improved educational provision.

Although the Institute's educational focus was diluted by the end of the 19th century, its significance is enhanced as a place of social gathering through its recreational activities, including being the first place to introduce billiards to the town, which later became a popular recreation. The longevity of this recreational side saw the Institute survive into living memory as a place of social activity, with associations and memories for Bishop Auckland residents. The building itself contains important deposits of communal value in the form of a series of caretaker's account books detailing membership and expenses, and caricature portraits of Institute presidents from the early 20th century. There is a strong likelihood that members of the community today have particular memories of the Mechanic's Institute which will reflect its place in town life in the mid-20th century.

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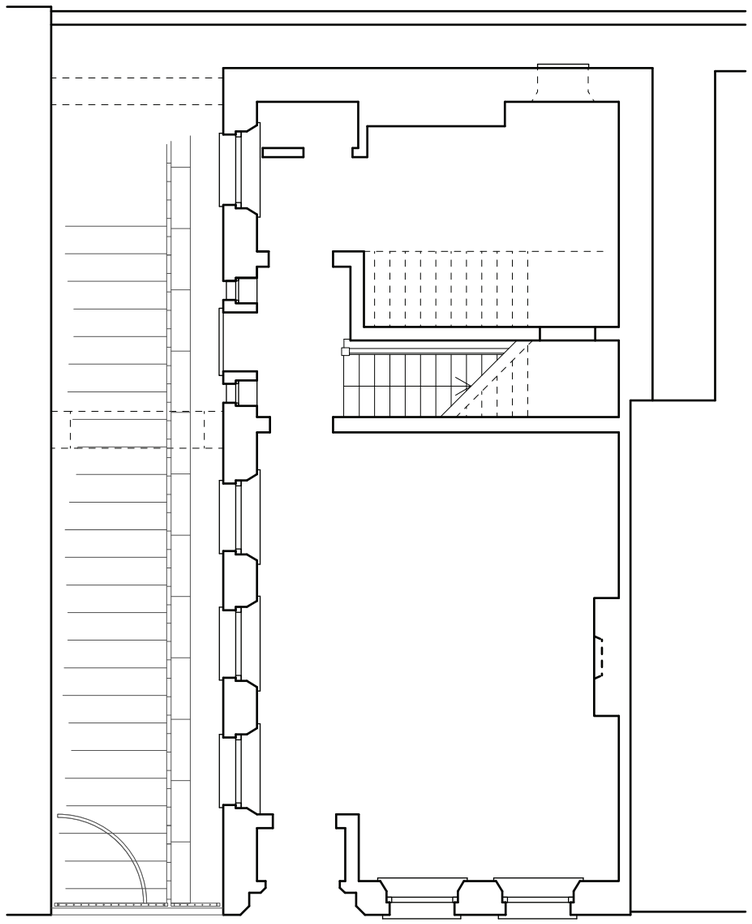
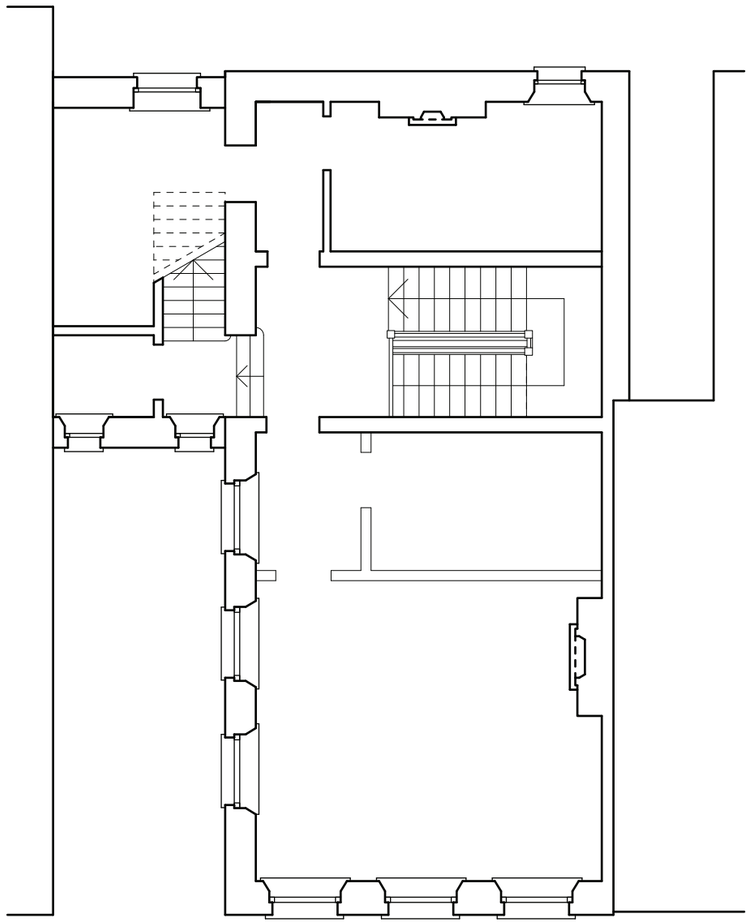
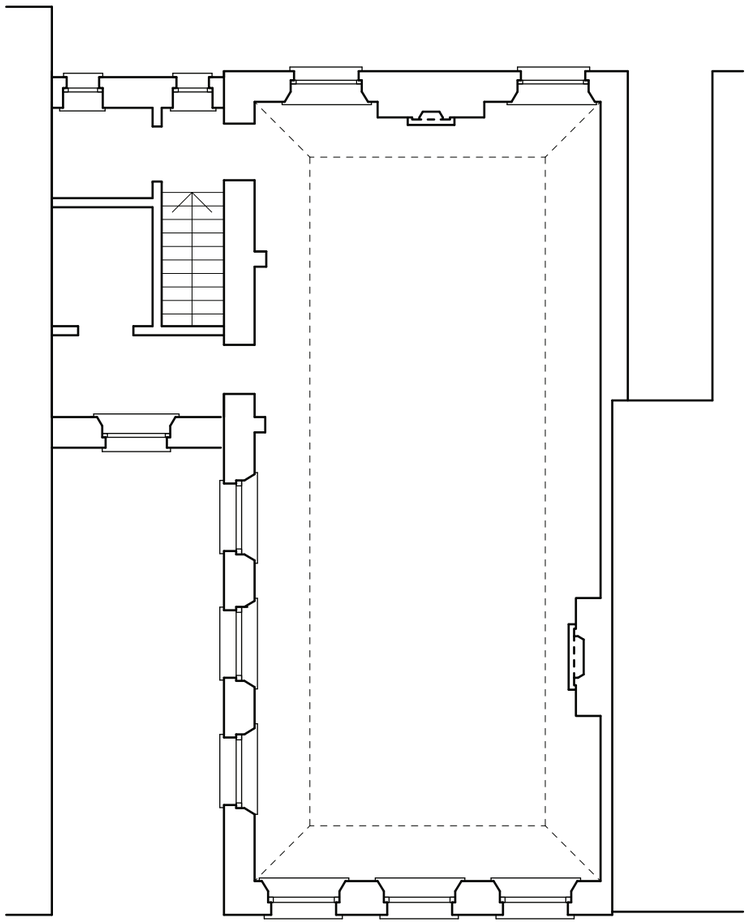


Existing Ground Floor SCALE 1:100



Existing First Floor SCALE 1:100



Existing Second Floor SCALE 1:100

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Victoria Avenue
Bishop Auckland
Durham

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Drawn: AJT, May 2019
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