The Library of the Nottingham Mechanics' Institution.*

IN January, 1845, thanks to the munificence of wealthy friends, and to the unstinted devotion of time and energy by all who shared the burden of management, the members of the Nottingham Mechanics' Institution found themselves the possessors of a substantial block of buildings, well suited to the objects of the institution, with the largest hall in the town, and a library of 3,000 volumes. In its new home the institution was open from 8.30 until 10 in the morning, from 12 till 2 in the afternoon, and from 4 till 10 in the evening. Until 1848 the provision made for the members in the way of newspapers and magazines had been limited to 30 periodicals placed in the library. No newsroom existed. The desire for accommodation of this description had obtained strong expression for several years, and in this year it was found practicable to comply with this wish by establishing a newsroom upon the premises, and subject to the management of the committee, but with separate membership and an additional subscription of 1s. 6d. per quarter. In the first year of its existence about 100 members became subscribers, many of whom gave increased subscriptions in order to maintain it. In 1852 the number of members again reached 1,000. In the same year the institution, in common with many other provincial institutes, entered into union with the Society of Arts. The year 1857 brought a radical change in the library department. A general desire had been expressed by the members that newspapers and other periodicals should be placed in the reading-room, and that the extra subscription for the newspaper-room should be abolished. The committee at length saw their way to making the desired change, and in the above year the amalgamation of the library, reading-room, and newspaper-room was effected, and the joint room was thrown open from 10 in the morning till 10 at night. The alteration was greatly appreciated by the members, although the funds did not permit the provision of more than 40 newspapers and magazines. Until the year 1863 the library had been available only from 12 to 2, and from 4 till 10, but in 1863, by making certain changes in the official staff, the committee were able to keep the library open during the whole day—a privilege which was greatly appreciated, and was followed by an immediate increase in the number of members of the institution. In 1865 a new librarian was appointed at a salary of £65 per annum. It may be a sign of the times that during the present year this gentleman has retired on a pension equal to the salary he was appointed at. In this season of prosperity, there befel the institution a misfortune which temporarily paralysed its working, and

* Read before the Annual Meeting of the Library Association held at Nottingham, September, 1891.
threatened to prove of lasting injury. On March 14th, 1867, the building was destroyed by a fire which, it is believed, originated in one of the corridors where the woodwork seems to have caught fire from a gas that had been left burning. The disaster might not have been so serious had not much delay occurred in getting the fire engine to work, owing to the difficulty experienced in finding the water plug amongst the frozen snow and ice which covered the ground. The greater part of the library, the specimens in the museum, and some articles of furniture were saved, but the building itself was reduced to ruins. Onerous as were the duties cast upon the committee by the necessity for rebuilding, the selection of plans, and the financial difficulty, the internal affairs of the institution were not neglected. A fortnight after the fire, rooms in Lincoln Street were engaged for the temporary accommodation of the members, and there, until the return of the institution to its own premises, the work of the library and reading-room was carried on as completely as the available space would allow. The committee speedily took in hand the work of reinstating the institution premises, and then the great problem of how to obtain the requisite funds presented itself for solution. The sum of £3,950 was received from the offices in which the building was insured, and with a portion of this amount the existing mortgages for £2,200 were redeemed. Within two months of the fire the committee had resolved to advertise a competition for designs for a new building, to include a large hall for the accommodation of 1,500 persons, a lecture hall, library, reading-room, and class-rooms; the cost not to exceed £8,000. With the recollection of the former generosity of the public in their minds, the committee determined to appeal again to their fellow townsmen for financial assistance, and most liberally was the appeal responded to, £2,580 being contributed. The present large hall is nearly double the size of that which was destroyed. It was opened on January 19th, 1869, when two concerts, one in the morning and the other in the evening, were given in celebration of the event. At the end of 1868 there were 1,452 members on the books. The year 1870 is chiefly remarkable for the institution of the Paget Free Memberships. Mr. C. Paget (at one time M.P. for Nottingham), a vice-president and a constant benefactor of the institution, devised a happy scheme for bringing young persons under the influence of the Mechanics' Institution. With this end in view, Mr. Paget generously offered £20, which was to be applied by the committee in the payment of the entrance fees and subscriptions of young persons. Mr. Paget made his gift annually until his lamented death, since which event it has been continued by Mr. Joseph Paget, J.P., who succeeded his father as vice-president. Of late years, young women, as well as young men, have been recipients of these free memberships. The Paget gift has been the means of introducing several hundreds of young people into the institution, and has proved of the greatest service in extending its influence amongst the artisan classes. It is satisfactory to know that the great majority of the recipients remain members permanently. In 1876, the arduous task of examining the books on the library shelves, and eliminating all volumes which were out of date or incomplete, was carried out. In this year the committee received from the trustees of the extinct Artisans' Library, whose property had been sold to the Corporation, the sum of £240, which it was stipulated should be expended in the advancement of science, or in the purchase of books of reference. The latter mode of utilising the gift was adopted, and, in 1877, a portion of the library was partitioned off to form a reference department. A new catalogue of the 13,000 volumes in the library was compiled by Mr. J. T. Radford, the assistant librarian, in this year, and was shortly afterwards published. The urgent necessity of providing further accom-
modation for the members induced the committee to erect a new reading-
room on the land adjoining the large hall, and in March, 1884, the
present news-room was opened to the members. In 1887 the members
celebrated their fiftieth anniversary of the institution, when a banquet,
two balls, and a conversazione were held. The whole of the building was
utilised for the conversazione. Its most interesting feature was an
exhibition of local literature, the first ever held in Nottingham. It
proved so successful that it was kept open three days, and was visited by
a large number of persons. But the feature by which the jubilee was
best commemorated was the publication of the history of the institution for
free distribution to the members. The work of compilation was under-
taken by four members of the committee, and it is to this work we are
indebted for the earlier details of this paper. During this year the com-
mittee decided on the formation of a Library of Local Literature; a col-
lection of books written on the history and topography of the district, of
plans, maps, views, and portraits, of books written by Nottinghamshire
men (as Kirke White, Byron, Bailey, the Howitt family, and many others),
and of fugitive pieces, as pamphlets, flysheets, reports, &c.; 342 books
were purchased in 1887, and in 1888 the collection was increased by over
700 volumes. In 1889 a library of music for circulation was formed, and
the 82 volumes in that branch circulated no less than 932 times in seven
months. In 1890 the collection had increased to 168 volumes, and the
issues to 2,177. In this year, too, the "bespoke system" became very
popular. Members have the privilege of proposing to the committee the
purchase of new books, and if such books are purchased the members
proposing the same have first loan of them, followed in turn by those
members who register their names in a book provided for the purpose,
and if a member provides a postcard he is informed by post that the book
he requires is waiting for him. The chief work of the present year has
been the provision of a librarian's workroom, the removal of the reference
department to a room where greater quiet is obtained, and the utilisation
of the old reference department for general library purposes. From the
figures for 1889 and 1890, it will be seen that the circulation of "Tales
and Fiction" was nearly 76 per cent. of the whole. For 30 years nothing
troubled the committee more than the large circulation of this class. In
1845 the proportion was only 20 per cent., in 1850 it had risen to over
50 per cent., and continued so until 1854, when the committee, in an
apologetic tone, attributed the large circulation to the young members,
to whom they recommended a more general use of the elementary books
of history, geography, and science. There were then 1,305 volumes of
fiction in the library. During the succeeding year only 30 new works
were added to this class, and the committee jubilantly reported a decrease
of over 1,000 issues. In 1856 and 1857 the number of books was not
increased and the issues decreased 4,000, and the members were fewer
in number. But in 1858 the circulation went up 3,000, and was nearly
50 per cent. of all issues. This the committee accounted for by sup-
posing that the members had perforce taken to fiction because they had
read all the other books in the library. From 1858 to 1862 the circula-
tion averaged about 45 per cent., but in 1863 it was only 30 per cent., in
the following year it had bounded up to 55 per cent., and so continued
during 1864, 1865, and 1866. For 1867 and 1868 no figures are given,
these being the years of rebuilding and reorganisation, but in 1869 and
1870 the issues of fiction were 60 per cent. In 1871 the committee con-
sidered the high circulation of novels required explanation, and in 1872,
when the percentage was the same, we are most gravely told that a large
proportion of these works were taken out for the use of the junior portions
of members' families, to whom technical and scientific works would be of
The Library.

no use. But after this, the tilt at the novel was over. The committee doubted the use of the table showing the issues of various classes of books. They thought it calculated to mislead anyone desiring to deduce reliable statistics as to the books really valued and used by the members, so from 1873 until 1885 a new class of figures was issued, showing, of course, the great wickedness of the novel readers compared with those of other classes. These figures related to the annual stocktaking, and showed the number of books missing, the novels missing being generally over 50 per cent. of the total. Prior to 1840 members were allowed free access to the shelves, but in this year the librarian complained that a large number of books were abstracted clandestinely, consequently from this year forward till 1857 members were under the necessity of making their selection from the catalogue, and applying to the librarian for the work they needed. This was always a tedious process, especially for the librarian, who perhaps after searching in the most distant corner of his shelves found the work to be in circulation, so in 1857 the old system was resorted to. This reform, as it was called, was conducive to a greater interest in the library, and doubtless much of the popularity of the institution is due to the freedom allowed members in their access to the books, although unfortunately the privilege is abused. The number of books missing at stocktaking has varied from 123 to 1,008, but the average may be taken at about 900. Last year 472 and this year 510 volumes were not returned in time. As a rule about 25 per cent. of these are traceable and recoverable; the remaining 75 per cent. represent books taken away clandestinely, the greater number of which are lost entirely to the library, chiefly through members being fearful of being detected in clandestinely returning them. This is an evil the committee have sought to deal with in every way save that of reverting to the "closed" system. Whether the popularity of the "open" system is a good set-off to a loss equal to 50 per cent. of the books added in each year is a problem which requires solving.

In 1872 with 1,983 members there were 38,000 issues.
In 1885 " 3,141 " " " 67,000 "
In 1889 " 3,830 " " " 92,000 "
In 1890 " 3,771 " " " 98,000 "

The figures for the last two years are worth noting, there being an increase of 6,000 issues in 1890. But in this increase the novel class scarcely shared at all, the great increase of reading being in the more solid classes of literature, thus:—History increased 30 per cent., travels 40 per cent., political economy 55 per cent., poetry 85 per cent., foreign languages 33 per cent. These increases are evidently due to the greater attention social subjects have demanded, to the impetus given to the study of geography by the discoveries of Mr. Stanley and others, and to the great change our educational system has undergone. Every year sees some progress in its attractions and public utility. At the Jubilee banquet his Excellency the American Minister (Mr. E. J. Phelps) thus tersely and happily sketched the past and present of the institution, and with his words this paper fittingly concludes:—"Begun in the generosity of some public-spirited and far-seeing men, it has overcome adversity, it has not abused prosperity, it has surmounted calamity, and it stands today with wealth that has come from poverty, with a multitude that has gathered from an individual with a generous library, with a noble structure, a building with the most fortunate memories of the past, the best prosperity for the present, the happiest promise for the future."

Percy Cropper.

(Hon. Sec. of the Nott. Mech. Inst. Library.)
### APPENDIX

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Periodicals</th>
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<td>700</td>
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<td>1841</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12,607</td>
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<td>980</td>
<td>3,081</td>
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<td>37,735</td>
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<td>7,121</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15,510</td>
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<td>1890</td>
<td>3,771</td>
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