

The Paisley Philosophical Institution

Founded 1808



Paisley Free Library and Museum

The Paisley Coffee House and Subscription Library
Founded 1803

The Coffee House owner and Librarian, Gilbert Smith, was one of the original members of the Institution and gave the lecture on "The Chemical Properties of Light" in December 1809, a remarkably early date for this scientific topic. As early as 1810 the library had 3000 volumes, significantly larger than its equivalent in Glasgow at the time.

THE PAISLEY LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

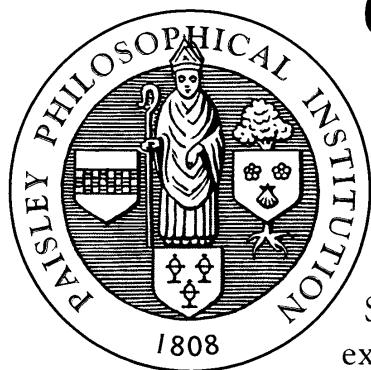


Renfrewshire
Council

The Museum and Library was unique in its day being the first purpose built building to house both a Free Library and a Museum under the same roof. It is still one of the best Municipal institutions of its type and continues to provide a free museum and library service to the public of Paisley and Renfrewshire.

The library and museum service retains its links with the Philosophical Institution who were instrumental in its foundation.

Paisley Free Library and Museum
Founded 1871



Origins

The Paisley Philosophical institution was formed in October 1808. The population of Paisley was then around 28,000, streets were lit by oil lamps and water was drawn from public wells. This was the year however in which John Dalton outlined the Atomic Theory and seven years before Sir Humphry Davy invented the miners' safety lamp. An expanding interest in knowledge of science was current and the first Minute of the Institution records the objectives of the members:

- To educate themselves in scientific matters
- To create a museum
- To establish a library

The term Philosophy in those days embraced all aspects of knowledge. Natural Philosophy was however becoming more scientific, being increasingly dependent on experimental evidence and less on speculation.

The membership in the early years comprised not only educated men from the established professions: ministers, lawyers and doctors, but business people who felt the need to extend their knowledge of Science and Engineering.

The early lectures reflected the particular interests of the various members. Chemistry, Botany, Geology and Astronomy all figured prominently in the first few years and it is notable that a lecture on the chemical properties of light was delivered during the second year of activities.

Trends in membership

In 1814 ladies were admitted to lectures but not to membership. The first lady speaker addressed the Institution in 1888 and thereafter ladies names appear with increasing regularity. It took a further 100 years however before the first Lady President was elected (1995 - 1998) but there was a successor in the year 2004.

In 1816 the Mechanics Society of Paisley was amalgamated with the Institution and the annual subscription reduced from 30s to 10s. A rule was passed in 1858 allowing the 'wage earning class' to be admitted as 'Associates' at a lower membership fee. This paved the way for a pattern of membership which has prevailed for the next 150 years to the present and beyond - membership is open to all who are interested in sharing the experiences of others and extending the boundaries of knowledge.

Progress, Problems and Prosperity

For the first 20 years of its existence the Philosophical Institution met in premises in Old Sneddon, Paisley. Here was accumulated books, scientific apparatus and a collection of natural history specimens.

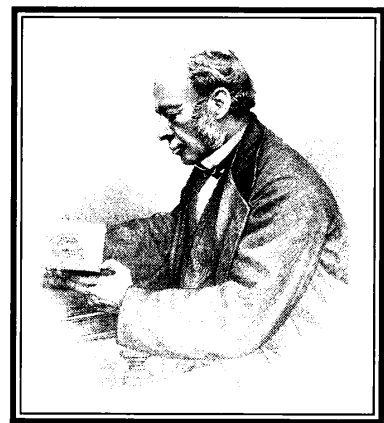
In 1828 the meeting place was transferred to the Abbey buildings, and activities, including weekly lectures, continued until 1846. In that year a Mr John Henning delivered a lecture on the Elgin Marbles. He had some years previously presented the Institution with casts of these Greek antiquities. They now reside in Paisley Museum.

A period of difficulty for the Institution occurred around this time associated with economic depression, Disruption of the Church of Scotland, and the bankruptcy of the town.

In 1857 a group of 73 gentlemen resurrected the Institution whose activities resumed and its possessions were reassembled in the School of Design in Paisley. The institution now entered its most prosperous era - its Golden Age. A period of important activity ensued, during which the Institution's impact on the community was to be greater than ever before or since. This was attributable in large part to the energy and drive of the then President, Rev. William Fraser, together with the patronage of the brothers James, Peter and Thomas Coats, the industrial pioneers of the Thread Industry.

Paisley Free Library and Museum

The increased activity of the Institution in its various sections after 1857, soon created problems of space, and several successful exhibitions demonstrated public interest. The desirability of a Museum and Library to house the collected material was actively promoted by Rev Fraser and it came to the sympathetic attention of Mr Peter Coats of Woodside. Having investigated Library and Museum development during business travel in the USA and on the Continent, he generously agreed to provide the town with the necessary means to build suitable premises on the understanding that the people of Paisley adopt the Free Libraries Acts to ensure their future upkeep. The cost of the project was around £15,000.



Peter Coats

The Paisley Philosophical Institution raised £1,600 in subscriptions towards the purchase of new books as well as donating their own library and exhibition material. Paisley Library Society also agreed to transfer their 15,000 volumes to the new library, thus ensuring a unique beginning to this partnership in philanthropy. The opening of these public facilities in 1871 was notable for their being Scotland's first Municipal Museum and Library to be built together.

Peter Coats was knighted by Queen Victoria at Windsor on 9th July, 1869.

Influence on Public Health

In 1831 a member, Dr Kerr, read a paper on a scheme to supply Paisley with piped water. The Institution published the paper and the idea was brought to the notice of the Town Council. A cholera epidemic the following year concentrated attention on Dr Kerr's plan and the Paisley waterworks Company was set up by Act of Parliament in 1835 to carry out the scheme. The supply commenced in 1838.

In 1865 a medical officer, Dr McKinley, read a paper on the need for proper sanitation in the town. This was followed up by a deputation from the Institution to the Town Council and in due course the systematic improvement of sanitation in Paisley began.

The 50 years to 1920

The administrative responsibilities of the Institution were now greater with the requirements for committees to manage the Museum, the Library and the Coats Observatory. This last was built by Thomas Coats in 1882 and its management entrusted to the Institution where it remained for 80 years. These were in addition to the organising of public lectures and the activities of the seven Sections of the Institution.

These were:

- Literary and Philosophical
- Astronomical and Meteorological
- Geological and Mineralogical
- Botanical and Zoological
- Natural History
- Chemical and Experimental Science
- Mechanical Engineering

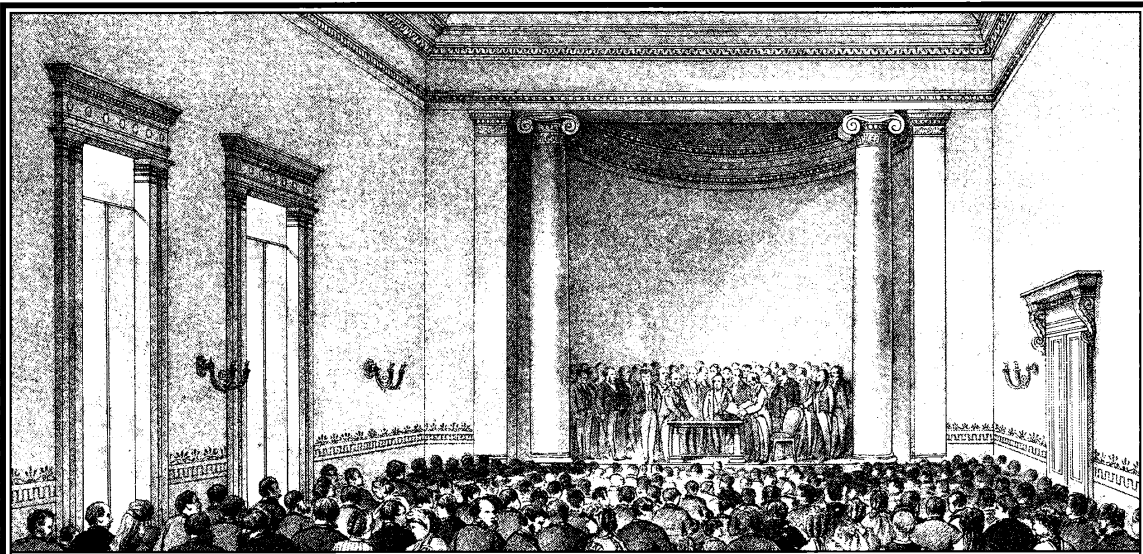
When Paisley Technical College was opened in 1897, the Institution was represented on the Board of Governors - an arrangement which lasted well into the 20th century.

Over time, Natural History, Astronomical and Photographic Societies have become independent, and the Library and Museum became Local Authority responsibilities.

1920 to the present

By the 1920s the Paisley Philosophical had become recognisable as the Institution it is today. Its real strength had become the high calibre of the speakers and the range and diversity of topics they addressed. The list of twentieth-century speakers reads like a roll of honour covering travel, literature, science, music and the arts, with a fair sprinkling of well-known personalities from radio and television. Occasionally, a larger venue has been required and in 1954 over 1000 people attended a lecture on 'The Ascent of Mount Everest' by one of the successful expedition.

The Institution started as a scientific society which had a profound effect on Paisley and then widened its scope and its audience. Although Natural Philosophy still retains its place, it is a smaller part of the overall picture reflecting the increased availability of education and the broader interests of the membership.



Lecture Hall - Ceremony of handing over the Building by Sir Peter Coats

On the occasion of the presentation of the new Library and Museum building to the town, Sir Peter Coats made an important request that 'the use of the Lecture Hall be given to the Philosophical Society (sic) so long as it retains its present constitution and prosecutes its present aims'.

This obligation has always been fulfilled and the members still meet today in the lecture hall which Sir Peter Coats provided for them in 1871.

The Paisley Design School Founded 1848

The educational activities of the Institution go back over 150 years to the time of the Design School and before. The Design School hosted the Institution during the difficult years around 1850



Developed from the Paisley Technical College and School of Art, the University today has over 12,000 students on a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses across its campuses in Paisley, Ayr and Dumfries. The University also has a growing number of students from across the world, benefiting from Paisley's innovative and vocational focus on careers and education.

The University is proud to retain its links with the Institution

*Paisley Technical College and School of Art
Founded 1897*

